

Performing Political Affect: Alter Egos and Black Feminism in Popular Music

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This dissertation explores the intellectual labor and political visionary work of Black women in popular music when performing through their alter egos. With Janelle Monáe, Nicki Minaj, and Beyoncé as three distinct case studies, I apply Black feminist theory to a creative process I call *alter egoing*. I theorize that by performing through their alter egos these artists act as critical interpreters of political culture. With the concept of alter egoing, I aim to identify and celebrate a Black feminist strategy that responds to mainstream discourses of hope and nostalgia circulating within contemporary electoral politics in the US.

Drawing on the work of Lauren Berlant (2011) and Sara Ahmed (2004), I understand affect as social feeling or bodily intensity. Thus, as I theorize how alter egoing engages in affective formation, I argue that these alter egos are indicative of shared, social feelings that are shaped by specific political events and socio-political environments (Ahmed 121). Additionally, I explore how the aesthetic evolution of these three artists builds on an Afrofuturist tradition specific to Black women that is propelled by contrasting ideological affects. Mindful of the historical emergence of alter egoing in the Obama era, I consider such experimental modes of representation as, in part, a response to American anti-Black populisms propelled by rhetorics of white nostalgia that emerged after 2002.

In my analysis of alter egoing, I illuminate the essential analytical work that Black feminist theory does for musical analysis by cross-examining music videos, visual albums, records and interviews in which alter egos are elicited (Monáe's *Metropolis Suites* [2007, 2010, 2012] and

Dirty Computer [2018]; Minaj's Pink Friday: Roman Reloaded [2012], The Pinkprint [2014], Queen [2018]; Beyonce's I am... Sasha Fierce [2008], Lemonade [2016], Black Is King [2020]). Ultimately, I argue how the critical creative process of alter egoing not only responds to contemporary US political culture, but simultaneously imagines futures that are explicitly Black, female, and queer

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Preface

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Introduction

When Janelle Monáe, Nicki Minaj, and Beyoncé are asked about their different alter egos during interviews, they each describe a different kind of relationship. “Hello, I am Janelle Monáe and I’m Cindi Mayweather,” Monáe begins to explain, “I believe we all possess multiple identities. I am half human, part droid.”¹ “Roman is a crazy boy who lives in me and he says things that I don’t want to say,” describes Minaj.² Beyoncé attempts to make her alter ego legible to the interviewer. “When you’re nervous,” she proceeds, “and that other thing kind of takes over you. Then Sasha Fierce takes over.”³

These quotes from three of the most prominent Black women in the U.S. American popular music industry illustrate the dynamic heuristic I explore in this dissertation, which I will refer to as: *alter egoing*. By describing how they relate to their artistic alter egos—as a part of themselves, or an involuntarily evoked alternate personality, or a persona that takes over in times of stress—each of these musicians also continued to craft an alter ego practice.

Alter egoing is a heuristic, a method for solving the problem of the shifting, evolving, and unstable personality or persona. When such alternate personalities or personas are analyzed through the lens of *alter egoing*, the refashioning of artistic imaginaries—by which I mean the

¹ “Talking with Janelle Monáe on sci-fi, androids and Slack (full interview),” YouTube video, 8:30, posted by CNET Highlights, Jan 15, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WLHAa-1D2WU>.

² “Nicki Minaj Explains Who Roman Is,” YouTube video, 2:23, posted by Christmatic International, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=km5R3KixDzo&t=22s>.

³ “Beyoncé on Her Alter Ego, Sasha Fierce | The Oprah Winfrey Show | Oprah Winfrey Network,” YouTube video, 1:36, posted by OWN, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4AA5G8vCl9w>.

world-building connected to the alter ego through implied backstories and identifiable narrative—become legible as intellectual labor. The intellectual labor that the artists in this dissertation primarily provide are critiques of U.S. notions of girlhood, womanhood, and Blackness. As the alter egos of Monáe, Minaj, and Beyoncé transform and evolve, *alter egoing* intimately connects the fluidity of their alter egos with contemporary U.S. political culture, a culture that reinforces “Blackness, queerness, disability, and femininity as mutually-intensifying feedback loops of precariousness.”⁴

This dissertation looks at contemporary U.S. popular culture, specifically icons of Black popular culture who engage in *alter egoing*. A partial definition of *alter egoing* is as a North American heuristic, a self-styling strategy that creates a kind of shortcut, a quickly recognizable narrative and backstory. It is an artistic strategy of counter-identification, that resituates the Black agent in a culture where the Black body has been historically used, in the words of scholar Stuart Hall, “as if it was, and it often was, the only cultural capital [Black Americans] had.”⁵ As a musicologist and cultural theorist, I theorize *alter egoing* as a kind of ongoing fashioning of the corporal body as a “canvas of representation,” supported by the verbal and vocal, which together generate an implied backstory and constructed, consistent identity-formation narrative.⁶

Identity-formation narratives, such as alter egos, stage names, and personas, are intimately tied to 20th- and 21st-century Black American artistic practices, most notably with DJ Kool Herc’s (née Clive Campbell) initiation of the hip hop genre in 1973.⁷ Some Black artists are known

⁴ Robin James. *Resilience & Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism* (Lanham: John Hunt Publishing, 2015), 17.

⁵ Stuart Hall, “What is this “Black” in Black Popular Culture?” *Black Popular Culture*. Ed. Michelle Wallace. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 109.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Michael Berry, *Listening to Rap: An Introduction* (Milton: Routledge, 2018), 64.

exclusively by their stage name, such as Shawn Carter's Jay-Z and Belcalis Almánzar's Cardi B.⁸ Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, spouse to Jay-Z and one of the most popular hip hop artists of the 21st century, uses alter *I am... Sasha Fierce*, (the specifics on how this alter ego operates will be discussed in the following chapter on Beyoncé). The Trinidadian-American rapper, Onika Maraj-Petty, is known professionally as Nicki Minaj; additionally, she has a roster of alter egos through which she performs (e.g. Barbie, Roman Zolanski).⁹ Alter egos do not reside solely in hip hop and rap, with David Bowie's femme Iggy Stardust or Garth Brooks' rock alter ego, Chris Gaines. The alter egos in hip hop are distinct, however, as they participate in an assemblage of Black American counter-practices of identification.

In the genres of rap and hip hop—which have traditionally been labelled as hyper-masculinized and sexually prescriptive—Black women have created strategies to combat restrictive and oppressive identity designations assigned to them due to their gender, race, and sexuality. In the face of the intersecting oppressive forces of racism and sexism, for example, some artists choose protective counter-practices of subversion, resistance, refusal, or insincerity, to name a few. Other artists take on practices of positive identification that, rather than acting explicitly against oppressive forces, step outside of oppressive logics, attempting to circumvent them entirely. These positive-facing strategies that focus on futurity and possibility, rather than W. E. B. Du Bois's fractured consciousness or Frantz Fanon's critique of recognition struggles as based in lack, for example, can be harder to identify, as they seem to elude the world of oppression in which racialized others maintain much of their context, even creating genres of their own

⁸ Jay-Z began rapping under the stage name Jazzy, which was soon shortened to Jay-Z, then Jay Z, and is sometimes stylized as JAY-Z.

⁹ Roman Zolanski first appeared in the song "Roman's Revenge" in Nicki Minaj's debut studio album *Pink Friday* (2010); Harajuku Baby first appeared in the mixed tape *Barbie World* (2010).

altogether.¹⁰ These positive-facing strategies can take the form of alternate humanities, Afrofuturism, and Black posthuman identities.¹¹

Some have theorized alter egos as aligning with positive-facing, worldbuilding strategies. Such is the case with Monica Bradley's work on alter egos in funk. She explores the historical conditions for women, queers, and people of color. The utility of alter egos, she concludes, is in the imaginative possibility to transform realities and transgress boundaries of race, gender, and sexuality.¹² Furthermore, such imaginative realities offered through alter ego strategies "put into effect future social 'realities,'" by proffering a more viable reality.¹³ In her study of George Clinton's Starchild alter ego, she argues for theatricality as a practical means for transforming reality, as a power to "affirm black existence in a racist world."¹⁴ *Alter egoing* goes a step further, affirming existence that is not only Black, but explicitly female and queer.

Alter going, a heuristic which I will continue to refine throughout the dissertation, is developed from artists' use of the alter ego. Scholars in communication, popular culture and music studies have analyzed the use of alter egos in varying contexts: rap artists' negotiation between capitalism and ghetto authenticity through hidden transcripts (Hess 2005); glam and funk artists' evocation of fantasy through performed identities (Bradley 2017); individual artists' self-propagating mythologies (Beller-McKenna 1999); collapsed identity theory (Krim 2000), and

¹⁰ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York Avenel, NJ: Gramercy Books, 1994): 2. *Double consciousness* describes African Americans whose identities are psycho-socially divided due to racial discrimination and enslavement. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967). Fanon presents a historical critique of colonial domination and the dehumanizing effects of racism on the human psyche.

¹¹ Tiffany King, *The Black Shoals : Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Durham ;: Duke University Press, 2019).

¹² Monica Bradley, "Glam Rock and Funk Alter-Egos, Fantasy, and the Performativity of Identities" in *Revista de Lenguas Modernas* (No. 26, 2017): 387.

¹³ Ibid., 388-389.

¹⁴ Ibid., 398.

ludic resistance.”¹⁵ My use of the noun “alter ego” could potentially be confused with other persona-based performance practices or psychoanalysis. In my use of the term “ego” I am not drawing from the psychoanalytic theoretical construct wherein the *id*, *ego*, and *super-ego* plot the activities of a person’s mental life. Neither does my use of alter ego refer to the performance of characters, which, in contrast to alter egos, are generally embodied by persons whose profession is dependent on fulfilling character roles as defined by scripts or librettos. There is no confusion between the actor and the character they happen to be performing; the role of the actor is understood as interpreter. The alter egos I analyze are neither avatars nor cosplay performances, despite Nicki Minaj’s cosplay-adjacent aesthetic, as alter egos are not mediated through video-game culture or cosplay fandom. Instead, my use of “alter ego” refers to the practice of performers, specifically musical artists, who create blurry, not quite separate-from-the-artist, alternative personas. My insistence on using the term “alter ego” as opposed to “persona” or “stage name” and my consequent creation of the verb “*alter egoing*” signals the ongoing, dynamic nature of the artistic strategy in relation to the artist’s regular construction of the alter ego within a context, similar to the dynamic nature of Judith Butler’s *performativity*.¹⁶

Alter egoing is first and foremost an artistic practice, a performance, and as such cannot be reducible to its social and political effects. Although this dissertation will intentionally connect this artistic practice to specific political concerns of the 21st century, *alter egoing* is a creative process with a creative logic and an artistic history that fundamentally shaped its creation; therefore, it does not always align precisely with non-artistic social or political logics. Additionally, *alter egoing* is not exclusive to Black genres of American popular music. Its

¹⁵ Mickey Hess, 2005. "Metal Faces, Rap Masks: Identity and Resistance in Hip Hop's Persona Artist." *Popular Music and Society* 28 (3): 304; Russel A. Potter, *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism* (Albany, NY: SUNY P): 1995.

¹⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2011).

relationship to Black genres, however, is particularly complex due to the fraught relationship many Black Americans historically have with identity construction, specifically the emancipatory group struggles toward Black self-determination in a country that enslaved African-descended people, systematically erasing non-white familial ties and Afrodiasporic histories (e.g. disrupting Black families through systematic rape and the selling of family members). This fraught historical relationship and its traces in the *alter egoing* of marginalized subjectivities provide an avenue for subversion, a praxis for circumventing race-based denial of full personhood. Subsequently, *alter egoing* remains crucial to hip hop, rap, R&B, funk and soul as a counter-practice of identification for Black women in the music industry.

Alter egoing offers possible alternate Black futurities through a positive, creative, mediated and, not least, capitalist act of artistic identity performance. As noted by bell hooks, Black women can engage in mainstream culture—a culture that operates off of capitalist logics—and “create alternative pleasures,” despite the original intent of that culture.¹⁷ One example of this creative ability can be seen in stage personas, which Mickey Hess argues, serve to obscure identities in genres commercially dependent on authenticity.¹⁸ In Hess’s estimation, “It is precisely through their construction of multiple artist identities that they position themselves to critique such contradictions, and the playful nature of their critique allows them also to benefit as artist-entrepreneurs from the contradictory economy of hip hop as business.”¹⁹ In my analysis of the alter egos of three successful, mainstream hip hop artists, I explore the emancipatory potential of *alter egoing* despite the regulatory nature of the neoliberal marketplace in which they circulate.

¹⁷ “Bell Hooks: Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness.” In *Gender Space Architecture*, 219–225. Routledge, 2000.

¹⁸ Mickey Hess, 2005. “Metal Faces, Rap Masks: Identity and Resistance in Hip Hop’s Persona Artist.” *Popular Music and Society* 28 (3): 298

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 309.

My mode of analysis aligns with Black feminist theorist Jennifer C. Nash and her scholarship on post-intersectional Black feminism. I am most inspired by Nash's counter-readings of racialized visual media (2014, 2018), wherein she refocuses the discourse away from descriptions of Black female bodies and their confinement and instead theorizes modes of intellectual production from these racialized bodies. Indeed, Nash's words, which I quote in full below, have helped to organize my own desire to intimately connect *alter egoing* with Black feminism. Nash contends that she

“Advance[s] a conception of black feminism that is expansive, welcoming anyone with an investment in black women's humanity, *intellectual labor*, and *political visionary work*, anyone with an investment in theorizing black genders and sexualities in complex and nuanced ways. [...] Shifting the content of black feminism from a description of bodies to modes of intellectual production might generate precisely the anxious defensiveness this book describes and aspire to unsettle.”²⁰

Nash is known for her nuanced take on racialized genre and media, and she argues that the defensive mode of analysis prevalent in Black feminist theory emerges from intersectionality's preoccupation with the interlocking natures of structures of domination.²¹ In contrast to this preoccupation, Nash argues in *Black Bodies in Ecstasy* (2014) for “analytical breathing room” that allows for a Black feminist archive that, instead of focusing solely on wounds and recovery, “imagines Black female ecstasy in all its complexity, paradoxes, and—at least at times—uncomfortable contradiction.”²²

²⁰ Jennifer C. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 5. Emphasis mine.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

²² Jennifer C. Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 32.

1.2 Critical Optimism, Ecstatic Disidentification, and Black Cyberfeminist Aesthetics

What makes the three artists in this dissertation different from other artists that use alter egos is their use of *critical optimism*, *ecstatic disidentification*, and *Black cyberfeminist aesthetics*. My approach and methodology are developed from the interdisciplinary influences of Black feminist theory, affect theory, and queer theory. The theories that *alter egoing* builds on include Michael Snediker's *queer optimism*, José E. Muñoz's *disidentification*, Jennifer Nash's *ecstasy*, and Meina Yates-Richard's *black cyberfeminist sonic aesthetics*. From my engagement with the work of Snediker, Muñoz, Nash, and Yates-Richards, I developed these three terms that help unpack the important and varied work *alter egoing* enables.

1.3 Chapter Summaries and Literature Review

In Chapter 2, “Janelle Monáe: Critical Optimism, Audacious Hope, White Nostalgia” Janelle Monáe's alter egoing performs *critical optimism*. Because *critical optimism*, which will be defined in due course, concerns politicized affects, a cursory discussion on affect and political culture is in order. As per the dissertation title, how does affect circulate in political culture? Nathan Manning and Mary Holmes give prescient examples of the invocation of affect or emotion in political culture, such as:

“[...] the outpouring of public indignation surrounding the Westminster expenses scandal; the ‘joy’ and excitement in Egypt as Mubarak was overthrown (Ali, 2011); anger at Tony Blair from families of British military personnel killed during the Iraq war (Lewis and Dodd, 2010); the shame evoked by President Bush's response to Hurricane Katrina

(Cornwell, 2010); the catharsis as Australia's Prime Minister formally apologised to Australia's Indigenous peoples."²³

Indignation, joy, excitement, anger, shame. These are just some of the emotions, or affects invoked by relatively recent political events.

Instead of emotion, I will intentionally align my analysis to the language of affect because of its theoretical lineage. Affect and its definition vary according to the theorists mobilizing the term.²⁴ Throughout this dissertation, such concepts as political *affect* and economies, are informed by Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, José E. Muñoz, and Ann Cvetkovich's question: "how do emotions work to align some subjects with some others and against others? How do emotions move between bodies?"²⁵ In politicizing the term affect, most obviously in the use of the terms *political affect* or *affective politics*, I use these terms by way of Jennifer C. Nash's definition of, "how bodies are organized around intensities, longings, desires, temporalities, repulsions, curiosities, fatigues, optimism, and how these affects produce political movements (or sometimes inertias).²⁶ Barack Obama developed an affective strategy based on his personal brand of hope, first presented in his book *The Audacity of Hope* (2006) (which is an adaptation from Jeremiah Wright's 1988 sermon "Audacity to Hope").²⁷ He developed his signature optimistic, hopeful politics while he was a senator and he continued to promote his "audacious hopefulness" into his 2008 presidential campaign. Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign also utilized an

²³ Nathan Manning and Mary Holmes, "Political Emotions: A Role for Feelings of Affinity in Citizens' (Dis)Engagements with Electoral Politics?" *Sociology* (Oxford) 48, no. 4 (2013): 698–714.

²⁴ Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

²⁵ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 118. For more on affect and the socio-political, see Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 121. She gives the definition that affect is a "social feelings that are shaped by specific political events and socio-political environments."

²⁶ Jennifer Nash, "Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-politics, and Post-intersectionality," *Meridians* 11.2 (2011): 3.

²⁷ Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope : Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* 1st ed. (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006).

affective political strategy, as he rallied his supporters around culturally white (male) nostalgia with the cry, “Make America Great Again.”²⁸ I understand the evolution of Janelle Monáe’s *alter egoing* as a reaction to these affective political strategies mobilized in electoral politics, the transformation of her alter egos indicative of shared, social feelings that evolve according to contemporary political events.²⁹

Even while the *alter egoing* of Janelle Monáe invokes dystopian Afrofuturist themes, which could lead one to assume an Afropessimistic critique, I instead understand her alter ego strategy as shifting from Afropessimism to a *critical optimism*. *Critical optimism* is an affective strategy that stands in contrast to the US political affective context of nostalgia for the past and pessimistic mourning for the future. The performative political practice of *critical optimism* that I theorize through Monáe’s *alter going* is influenced by Céline Leboeuf’s interrogation of Obama’s audacious hope and Lauren Berlant’s analysis of political affect and genre (2011).³⁰ Leboeuf, borrowing from Richard Rorty’s social hope, refurbishes Obama’s audacious hope in the “era of Trump” and argues that “social hope is founded on the affinities that social groups may share and that these affinities can lead to broader coalitions and, as a result, to large-scale political progress”³¹ Rather than blind hope, Leboeuf mobilizes *audacious hope* as a means of circumventing dissatisfaction with the politics in Washington and instead pushes citizens towards political participation with a critical hope in the possibility of progress.³²

²⁸ Throughout this dissertation I use the phrase “white (male) nostalgia,” to indicate the historic whiteness of the sentiment “Make America Great Again,” and its implicit maleness, as a nostalgic longing for pre-Obama America.

²⁹ Sara Ahmed, “Affective Economies.” *Social text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 121

³⁰ Lauren Gail Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham N.C: Duke University Press, 2011).

³¹ Céline Leboeuf, “The Audacity of Hope”: Reclaiming Obama’s Optimism in the Trump Era” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 33, no. 2 (2019): 260; Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York, N.Y: Penguin, 1999).

³² Leboeuf, 265.

In Berlant's work on affect and genre, she theorizes the emerging genres of the 1990s, such as the cinema of precarity, and argues that they "register a shift in how the older state-liberal-capitalist fantasies shape adjustments to the structural pressures of crisis and loss that are wearing out the power of the good life's traditional fantasy bribe without wearing out the need for a good life."³³ The logic of Berlant's temporal scope in *Cruel Optimism* is mobilized in my analysis of Janelle Monáe in relation to the mounting white nostalgia following the 2008 presidential election.

Critical optimism shares an even closer affinity with Michael Snediker's *queer optimism* (2006).³⁴ Like Snediker's meta-optimism key to his formulation of optimism, *critical optimism* is a reflexive process wherein the marginalized subject is aware of the material realities which negate their personhood. *Critical optimism* modifies Snediker's queer optimism with a bell hooksian' oppositional stance.³⁵ Similar to hooks' political rebellion found in the looking back, or returned gaze of the racialized subject, these artists, through *alter egoing*, are able to craft a unique narrative wherein they defy the futures and outcomes that have been designated to them as racialized women in a racist, heteropatriarchal society.

In Chapter 3, "Nicki Minaj: American Girlhood, Ecstatic Disidentification, and Queer Catharsis," I understand Minaj's *alter egoing* as generating an amalgamation of Muñoz's and Nash's survival strategies that operate within and outside of oppressive structures. Muñoz defines *disidentification* as a "survival strateg[y] the minoritarian subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere."³⁶ Disidentification is a "mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure or strictly oppose it; rather,

³³ Berlant, 7.

³⁴ Michael D. Snediker, *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

³⁵ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992).

³⁶ José E. Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (U of Minnesota P, 1999), 4.

disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology [...] a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within.”³⁷

Attaching Nash’s *ecstasy* to disidentification gives Munoz’s theory an affective, but no less critical, modification. Nash defines *ecstasy* as “the possibilities of female pleasures within a phallic economy and to the possibilities of Black female pleasures within a white-dominated representational economy. *Ecstatic disidentification* articulates the unique emancipatory potential of Minaj’s *alter egoing* through what at first appears to be mere adherence to mainstream logics and oppressive stereotypes. By using “the majoritarian culture as raw material,” Minaj creates space for agency in a world that does not allow expressive freedom to Black women. *Ecstatic disidentification* renders porous the boundary between subjecthood and objectification, emancipation and oppression, thus making space for Black expression within the constraints of a racist, heterosexist, mass-mediated marketplace.

This critical framework reveals the rich, uncomfortable contradictions of Minaj’s *alter egoing* and maps the pleasurable possibilities that come from a Black woman working “on and against” oppressive logics. *Alter egoing*, when using *ecstatic disidentification*, becomes a form of intellectual labor, a project that takes on objects and actions traditionally viewed as regressive and infuses them with new emancipatory meaning.

The final term, and the one that I use extensively in Chapter 4, “Beyoncé: Sasha Fierce, Formation Beyoncé, Pan-African Mother,” is *Black cyberfeminist aesthetics*. *Black cyberfeminist aesthetics* is not a novel concept, but it adds non-sonic elements to Yates-Richard’s *black cyberfeminist sonic aesthetics*. My purpose for using *Black cyberfeminist aesthetics* is not to construct a new critical framework, but rather to situate *alter egoing* within and in contrast to

³⁷ Ibid., 11-12.

Afrofuturism and technofeminism. Monáe, Beyoncé, and Minaj use *Black cyberfeminist aesthetics* most frequently through cyborg iconography and sonic evocation of the technological, which work to subvert the normative, white regulatory gaze imposed on Black women in popular culture.

Black cyberfeminist aesthetics is indebted to the work of Afrofuturist literature and art, although I will argue it extends beyond Afrofuturism's implicit boundaries. Afrofuturism can in some ways be applied to the sonic and visual features used in conjunction with these artists' *alter egoing*. In using *Black cyberfeminist aesthetics* to understand specific features of *alter egoing*, I signal both a connection to and a break from Afrofuturism. Much of Afrofuturism disregards gender and inadvertently renders the genre implicitly male as the literary canon is dominated by male writers.³⁸ Thus by invoking Black cyberfeminist aesthetics, rather than Afrofuturism, I make gender, specifically Black womanhood, an essential matrix of my *alter egoing* heuristic. Black cyberfeminist aesthetic draws from literary and musical traditions of the technological, which are traditionally marked as masculine, and in turn presents a deviant femininity through *alter egoing*.

There are a few definitions and uses of the term Afrofuturism. Adriano Elia, in his article on W.E.B. Du Bois and proto-Afrofuturism, gives a tight definition of Afrofuturism as a "movement, a transnational and interdisciplinary, theoretical and literary-cultural enterprise that has endeavored to rethink the history of Black civilisation in order to imagine a different, better, future."³⁹ Music critic, writer, and originator of the term "Afrofuturism," Mark Dery (1994) applies the description of Afrofuturism to other music genres, defining it as, "the self-conscious appropriation of technological themes in Black popular culture, particularly that of rap and other

³⁸ Mark Dery coined the term 'Afrofuturism' in *Flame Wars: the Discourse by Cyberculture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 180.

³⁹ Adriano Elia, "W.E.B. Du Bois's Proto-Afrofuturist Short Fiction: «The Comet.» *Il Tolomeo (Online)* 18, no. 1 (2016): 173.

hip-hop representations.”⁴⁰ This version of Afrofuturism is usually associated with literature, but it has also had a place in the music industry, historically in funk with Sun-Ra and his avant garde big band as the quintessential example.⁴¹

The artists I analyze sit at the intersection of the above definitions of Afrofuturism and Donna Haraway’s technofeminist ideology. *Technofeminism* is a feminist posthumanist theory, initially posited by Haraway in “A Cyborg Manifesto,” wherein she suggests that “feminists should move beyond naturalism and essentialism,” and further concludes that, “it is better strategically to confuse identities.”⁴² By immobilizing ethnic histories and racial lineages, technofeminism ignores the inescapable identity designations of minoritarian women and the emancipatory potential of racially specific sisterhoods and mythologies.

Black cyberfeminist aesthetics points to the absence of race in theories of technofeminism and the limited inclusion of gender in Afrofuturist critique. Rather than amending Afrofuturism or technofeminism to include the matrices of gender and race (respectively), *Black cyberfeminist aesthetics* allows a more complete description of the performative practices of the artists with which this dissertation is concerned. *Black cyberfeminist aesthetics* allows me to articulate the unique work performed through alter egos when Black women in the industry utilize such performative tactics. Like Richard-Yates’ theory, *Black cyberfeminist aesthetics* critiques the desire in theoretical framing to “shed the raced, gendered body by centering the black female flesh-as-android.”⁴³ With this background in mind, Monáe’s, Minaj’s, and Beyoncé’s overall

⁴⁰ Mark Dery, *Flame Wars: the Discourse by Cyberculture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994): 97.

⁴¹ For more on the condensed history of Afrofuturism, see: Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones, “Introduction,” in *Afrofuturism 2.0 : the Rise of Astro-Blackness* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2016).

⁴² Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991): 149.

⁴³ Meina Yates-Richard, “‘Hell You Talmhout’: Janelle Monáe’s Black Cyberfeminist Sonic Aesthetics.” *Feminist review* 127, no. 1 (2021): 38.

engagement with technology and the cyborg extends beyond the disciplinary boundaries of Afrofuturism and technofeminism through *Black cyberfeminist aesthetics*.

1.4 Conclusion: Emerging Genres Making Alter Egos Possible

The genre in which *alter egoing* appears most frequently is the visual album. There may be a couple different reasons why *alter egoing* coincides with this newly emergent genre. Scholars Ciara Barret's and Paula Harper's analyses have helped me think through this relatively recent genre trend in the works of Monáe, Minaj, and Beyoncé, and in other Black women's albums more generally.

Barret, in her article on hip hop visual albums, explores why Black female artists have recently been producing works in the genre of the visual album. She argues that the emerging long-form video format allows a radical expression of female authorship in a genre (hip hop) that traditionally bears repressive politics of gender and race, particularly through the short music video format.⁴⁴ At the end of the article, Barrett concludes all of her points, painting Beyoncé as “revolting” against the hip hop music video industry through this new genre format. She insists that the usage of the visual album “must be seen as a radically feminist act,”⁴⁵ because it both remediates formal and narrative film conventions and asserts a female authorial voice.

Labelling a commercial work emancipatory and “radical” may seem incongruous in some feminist circles, specifically those that position capitalism as, by its very nature, exploitative of

⁴⁴ Ciara Barrett, “Formation of the Female Author in the Hip Hop Visual Album: Beyoncé and FKA Twigs,” *Intellect* (2016).

⁴⁵ Ciara Barrett, “Formation of the Female Author in the Hip Hop Visual Album: Beyoncé and FKA Twigs,” *Intellect* (2016): 55

women.⁴⁶ However, this critique elides hip hop feminism's predication on the feminist possibilities of mass-marketed hip hop and eclipses the possibilities of liberation through commercial success, such as that achieved by Monáe, Minaj, and Beyoncé in their visual albums. Feminisms that do not automatically disqualify commercially successful artists and their works give room for contradiction, "because failure to do so relegates feminism to an academic project that is not politically sustainable beyond the ivory tower."⁴⁷

Musicologist Paula Harper's assessment of genre and its bearing on gender may support Barret's point that the usage of the visual album is a (radical) feminist act. Harper analyzes the viral techniques used in the visual album "BEYONCÉ" and interrogates the impact of twenty-first century digital media and circulation on pop music, celebrity and fan practices, genre, and form.⁴⁸ What caught my attention in her critique of genre was the dichotomy it articulated between the concept album and the visual album. By the prevailing definitions, "BEYONCÉ" should be labeled a concept album, as it is "a holistic musical object eschewing the forms of commodified singles in favor of presenting a united narrative, musical, and artistic vision."⁴⁹ When Beyoncé's first visual album was released, it was described by the press as a "non-linear journey through the thoughts and visions of Beyoncé. The antithesis of making singles" (Parkwood Entertainment and Columbia Records). However much this fulfills the definition of a concept album, the official press release explicitly stated that "BEYONCÉ" was *not* a concept album, but rather a *visual album*.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ For more on how various feminisms relate to capitalism, see Mary Evans, Clare Hemmings, Marsha Henry, Hazel Johnstone, Sumi Madhok, Ania Plomien and Sadie Wearing, eds. *The SAGE Handbook of Feminist Theory*. London: SAGE Publications, 2014; Zillah R. Eisenstein, *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978; Michèle Barrett, *Women's Oppression Today: the Marxist/feminist Encounter*. Rev. ed. (London;: Verso, 1988).

⁴⁷ Aisha Durham, Brittney C Cooper, and Susana M Morris. "The Stage Hip-Hop Feminism Built: A New Directions Essay" *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38, no. 3 (2013): 723.

⁴⁸ Paula Harper, "BEYONCÉ: Viral Techniques and the Visual Album." *Popular Music and Society*, 42, no. 1 (2019): 62.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

What Harper's analysis brings out is the mythology around the concept album genre, that it is marked by "authenticity" and "anti-commercialism," which, she argues, marks it as a masculine genre. This masculinization of the concept album genre stands in direct contrast to the general conception of pop music--which Monáe's, Minaj's, and Beyoncé's work falls into, with their record of crossover radio success--as inauthentic and commercialized. According to Stimeling, "the concept album became a musical and physical symbol of rock's anti-commercial rhetoric and artistic aspirations."⁵¹ And this is where I see the dichotomy between "concept" and "visual" doing identitarian work. In this dichotomy, "concept" and "visual" are set up as antonyms. The term concept album with its generic home in rock ("concept album") and the quasi-philosophical association of the "concept" tag, marks this format as masculine. "Concept," as a noun, also affirms the "thingness" of an album, suggesting a stable object-like tangibility. This is in contrast to the term "visual," a word which is most often used as an adjective, with no "thingness" assumed. Even when used as a noun, the "visual" connotes a sensory domain, or a thing to be looked (and not reasoned with) which is historically, and some argue currently, a feminine-coded experience.

Scholars have discussed different aspects of the visual album from a feminist point of view. Without explicitly theorizing visual albums (versus music video), Shana Redmond argues that Monáe "wields her erotic power to counter and to provide an alternative to the dominant paradigm of Black female sexuality within the music video genre" (Redmond 403). For example, in her analysis of the music video "Cold War," Redmond examines how Monáe's visual disembodiment subverts music video culture stereotypes of gendered Black nudity.

⁵¹ Travis D. Stimeling, "'Phases and Stages, Circles and Cycles': Willie Nelson and the Concept Album." *Popular music* 30, no. 3 (2011): 390.

Nathalie Aghoro points to the genre of the concept album itself as especially apt at negotiating notions of agency and gender. Aghoro analyzes this negotiation in the concept albums of Erykah Badu and Janelle Monáe (Aghoro 2018). She argues that the dynamic nature of the genre allows the artists to constitute their alter-egos as “ever-becoming Black female agents against all the odds” (Aghoro 331). In delivering “pluralistic, open-source blueprints,” she further argues that these concept albums allow audiences to “question their own boundaries playfully and to explore new possibilities for action and subject formation” (Aghoro 339). The optimism in Aghoro’s analysis (“ever-becoming Black female agents against all odds”) also resonates with the affective shift I explore in the visual albums of Monáe, Minaj, and Beyoncé.

Despite these strictures that most tightly grasp the Black female performing body, Ciara Barrett argues that experimental filmic modes of representation broaden artists’ creative control over their audio, images, narrative and signification (2016). It is important to note that experimental aesthetic choices may signify agency and be read as such by spectators. When analyzing the linkage between contemporary political culture, the presiding affective economy, and artistic output that negotiates these factors, then how such works are read by spectators takes on a kind of political importance.

Alter egoing’s home is in the visual album. The way the visual album has been taken up by women in hip hop to destabilize narrative conventions of film and muddle genre expectation invites the practice of *alter egoing*. The loose narrative that *alter egoing* requires and that the visual album formally exploits, allows for various affective formations that explicitly and implicitly align subjects with both specific political concerns, like police brutality and the regulation of female reproductive health, yet still broad political concerns, such as gender performance and sexual expression. As stated by voting rights activist Stacey Abrams after the Georgia senate election in

2020, electoral politics are the visible manifestation of ongoing non-electoral struggles.⁵² Through *alter egoing*, non-electoral struggles are given an aesthetic narrative form.

⁵² *All In: The Fight for Democracy*, directed by Lisa Cortes and Liz Garbus (Amazon Studios, 2020), 1hr., 42 min. https://www.amazon.com/All-Fight-Democracy-Stacey-Abrams/dp/B08FRV55VB/ref=sr_1_1?keywords=all+in+the+fight+for+democracy&qid=1647270771&prefix=all+in%3A+th+efight+for%2Caps%2C96&sr=8-1

2.0 Janelle Monáe: Critical Optimism, Audacious Hope, White Nostalgia

2.1 Introduction

“Who is Cindi Mayweather?” the CNet interviewer asks Janelle Monáe.⁵³ Monáe takes a dramatic pause, slowly turns to face the camera, as though attached to a dolly, mechanically pivoting towards the audience, and she says in monotone: “Hello, I am Janelle Monáe.” Her face softens, her natural timbre returns, “and also Cindi Mayweather. [...] I am half human, part droid.”⁵⁴ This performative tactic in interviews is characteristic of Janelle Monáe’s public self-presentation across her almost two decades-long career. It has historically been difficult to separate the android alter ego from Janelle Monáe the person. The already porous boundary between Monáe and Cindi Mayweather is further muddled when she explains to interviewers that, “I only date androids.”⁵⁵

I’ve been intrigued by Janelle Monáe’s ambiguous relationship to the convoluted narrative of her android alter ego since her 2007 debut EP, but it was the 2018 refashioning of her alter ego in *Dirty Computer* that instigated my conception of *alter egoing*. When I watched the nearly fifty-minute visual album for the first time, I remember being struck by the distinct, almost jarring shift in Monáe’s persona from her previous albums, from the physically rigid yet frenetic Cindi to the sensuously punk Jane57821. As I familiarized myself with Jane57821 of *Dirty Computer* and

⁵³ “Talking with Janelle Monáe on sci-fi, androids and Slack (full interview),” YouTube video, 8:30, posted by CNET Highlights, Jan 15, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WLHAa-1D2WU>.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Alex Benson, “The Alien Metaphor: Queer Identity In Modern Music.” Medium. April 29, 2019. Accessed May 22, 2019. <https://medium.com/loopandreplay/the-alien-metaphor-f1045ec1ba2a>.

compared her with the android Cindi Mayweather of the *Metropolis Suites* I knew so well (as a longtime fan), I detected a choreographed evolution in Monáe's affective strategy.

Before I continue, it is important to note that I make a distinction between the alter egos used in Janelle Monáe's *Metropolis Suites* and in *Dirty Computer*.⁵⁶ The alter ego Cindi Mayweather, in my analysis, belongs to the *Metropolis Suites*, which include an EP released in 2007, and her two following albums released in 2010 and 2013. Although used somewhat interchangeably with Cindi Mayweather in these earlier albums, I locate the Jane57821 alter ego in the 2018 visual album *Dirty Computer* in order to delineate what I perceive as a shift in *alter egoing*.

I understand Monáe's *alter egoing* as a reaction to the affective political strategies mobilized in electoral politics, the transformation of her alter egos indicative of shared, social feelings that evolve according to contemporary political events.⁵⁷ Obama developed an affective strategy based on his personal brand of hope, first presented in his book *The Audacity of Hope* (2006) (which is an adaptation from Jeremiah Wright's 1988 sermon "Audacity to Hope").⁵⁸ He developed his signature optimistic, hopeful politics while he was a senator and he continued to promote his "audacious hopefulness" into his 2008 presidential campaign.

In this chapter, I track the affective evolution of Monáe's *alter egoing* from pessimism to optimism in the context of the anti-Black populisms of the post-Obama era (2016-), culminating in a close reading of her 2018 album, *Dirty Computer*. In doing so, I first explore Cindi

⁵⁶ Discography: Janelle Monáe, Big Boi, Saul Williams, Wondaland ArchOrchestra of Montreal, and Deep Cotton. *The ArchAndroid: Suite II and III*. Bad Boy Records/Wondaland, 2010; Janelle Monáe, "Dirty Computer" Place of publication not identified: Bad Boy Records, 2018; Janelle Monáe, *Metropolis: The Chase Suite I*. Bad Boy Records, 2007; Janelle Monáe, Prince, Erykah Badu, Solange, Miguel, and Esperanza Spalding. *The Electric Lady*. Bad Boy Records/Wondaland, 2013.

⁵⁷ Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies." *Social text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 121

⁵⁸ Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope : Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* 1st ed. (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006).

Mayweather's relationship to race, gender, and sexuality. The sonic and visual aesthetics of the Metropolis Suites expose the racialized and queer features of the seemingly post-race heteronormative Cindi Mayweather. In identifying Cindi Mayweather's troubled relationship with notions of normative identity (read: white heterosexuality), I will evaluate the relevance of posthumanism and Afrofuturism, which scholars have used to critique U.S. American notions of race, gender, and sexuality. The chapter concludes by noting the pros and cons of strategies that rely on either universality or specificity. I will offer *critical optimism* as an alternative, a strategy that Monáe begins to construct through her *alter egion* in *Dirty Computer*.

From the lyrics of Monáe's songs (e.g. "Mr. President") to the visuals of her visual albums (e.g. "Pynk's" intertextual critique of Trump's infamous "grab them by the pussy" comment) a calculated shift in affect emerged contemporaneously with the election of the first Black president of the United States and the cultural backlash to his election. The significance of this chronology is the contemporaneous emergence of rhetorics of white (male) nostalgia, propelled by anti-Black populisms. As I investigate the evolution of Monáe's *alter egoing*, I argue that her most recent affective strategy, *critical optimism*, is a strategic update from her prior Afropessimist orientation.

2.2 Cindi Mayweather as All-inclusive Heroine or Racialized Subject

"Who is Cindi Mayweather?" As I mentioned, this is one of the most frequently asked questions of Janelle Monáe and her music, to which she almost as frequently responds that Cindi represents, "all who are marginalized."⁵⁹ Mobilizing the supposed universality of an alien android,

⁵⁹ Exclusive Interview, "Janelle Monáe Says 'Q.U.E.E.N.' is for the 'Ostracized & Marginalized.'" Accessed October 27, 2020. <https://www.fuse.tv/videos/2013/09/janelle-monae-queen-interview>.

Mon   crafted an alter ego to meet the need for non-normative representation in American popular music. In this same spirit, Mon   explains that her use of the nickname “Q.U.E.E.N.,” (for herself and her “electric lady” cohort of her 2013 album), is an acronym for “the queer community, untouchables, emigrants, excommunicated and those labeled negroid.”⁶⁰ Mon  ’s use of the android emphasizes her project to be an all-inclusive heroine representing “all who are marginalized,” an attempt to be relevant to whoever considered themselves not represented by contemporary popular music artists.⁶¹ Cindi Mayweather, by default, featured a lack of specificity that, in some ways, blunted the subversive nature of the *alter egoing*. Media scholar Dan Hassler-Forest addresses what he sees as neoliberal maneuvering. Although ultimately evaluating her work as helping consumers and fans think beyond the confines of capitalist realism, Hassler-Forest ascribes much of Mon  ’s success to her compatibility with the cultural logic of neoliberal capitalism. I argue further that this approach can be understood as a neoliberal maneuver shaped by Obamian hopefulness, a post-race optimism.

Cindi Mayweather’s all-inclusive marginality via the metaphor of the android belies a commentary on Blackness. In the song “Violet Stars, Happy Hunting!!!” Cindi Mayweather sings:

I’m a slave girl without a race
On the run cause they’re here to erase
And chase out my kind.

Despite this nominal denial of race, Janelle Mon   circumvents the postracial rhetoric with an analogy: an android illegally in love with a human. Because of her illegal intimacies, Cindi Mayweather is sentenced for disassembly. She’s forcibly sent back to our time and becomes a messiah figure known as the ArchAndroid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

A prime example of the subtextual racialization of Cindi Mayweather can be found in *The Metropolis* hit single “Many Moons.” The entire music video revolves around an event that is a cross between a concert, a fashion show, and an auction. The event is introduced by the auctioneer as “The Annual Android Auction.” As she begins to describe the androids for sale, she is accompanied by a lyrical orchestral string melody set against a guitar plucking a descending bass tetrachord. The instrumentation and melody do not particularly signify Blackness, however, an assortment of horns enter on the fifth repetition of the descending tetrachord with an ascending fifth and an electric organ becomes a part of the instrumentation soon thereafter; these shifts in instrumentation gesture towards 1960’s big band, with a twist of Black church and funk.

Clones of Cindi Mayweather await their turn to walk the auction runway in their various costumes and wigs. The original Cindi Mayweather, “The Alpha Platinum 9000,” steps onto the center stage that is flanked by the runway. The bidding begins. She and her bandmates begin their performance for the auction patrons as she watches her likeness being bought and sold. What could conjure a neo-slave narrative more than rows of Cindi Mayweather androids lining up to walk the auction block?⁶²

In “Many Moons,” Cindi literally performs race. Before mounting the music stage overlooking the humanoid products for sale, Cindi, her android body a synthetic pearly white, pushes a button located at her temple and suddenly her white visage switches to a natural melanated hue (see Figure 1 and 2). In a literal sense, race is a technology Cindi uses to fulfill her prescribed role as racialized musical entertainer. Furthermore, she uses Black musical topoi, Black stereotypes, and queer Black language. Funk grooves and rap breaks tie Cindi Mayweather to the urban Black American music. When she sings “we eat wangs and throw them bones on the

⁶² Gillian Andrews, (July 21, 2010). “Janelle Monáe turns rhythm and blues into science fiction”. io9.com
Retrieved September 30, 2010.

ground,” she takes pride in a Southern Black heritage. Despite the claim that Cindi Mayweather is ambiguously marginalized, her marginality is further specified by the lyrics “serving face,” (in the song “Q.U.E.E.N.”) which connects her to queer Blackness (a preview to Monáe’s coming out as a queer Black woman a decade later).



Figure 1: Cindi Mayweather before switching on her Black skin for the Annual Android Auction in “Many Moons.”



Figure 2: Cindi Mayweather after switching on her Black skin just prior to performing at the Annual Android Auction in “Many Moons.”

Monáe’s elision of race, with a protagonist that both explicitly refuses to comment on race and at the same time be so transparently consumed by it, spoke to the political moment in which some Black people found themselves during an era of supposed color blindness. Ellis Cashmore, in his work on celebrity and Beyoncé, maintains that, “After September 11 2001, Americans became more preoccupied with emphasizing their similarities rather than differences.”⁶³ The

lyrics and musical topoi in the Metropolis Suites, and in “Many Moons” in particular, subvert Cindi Mayweather’s claim of all-inclusive, post-racial identity. Thus, Cindi Mayweather attempts to circulate in an Obama world of supposed post-raciality, and yet her subtextual connection to Blackness belies her gestures towards universality.

From *Metropolis* to *Dirty Computer*, Monáe uses what Faedra Chatard Carpenter calls *whiteface*. Carpenter theorizes six types of whiteface: *tinted whiteface*, *optic whiteface*, *nonconforming whiteface*, *naturalized whiteface*, *linguistic whiteface*, and *presumed aural whiteface*.⁶³ Before Cindi Mayweather turns on her Blackness in “Many Moons,” she could be said to be performing *optic whiteface*. Carpenter defines *optic whiteface* as the absence of color—a performed whiteness that is visually opaque, paintlike, and bright white. “Many Moons” demonstrates *optic whiteface*, as does Beyoncé’s 2013 song “Mine” in which she cradles the head of a person whose entire body is painted synthetic white. (see Figure 3)

By contrast, *tinted whiteface* is featured in Monáe’s “Q.U.E.E.N.” from *The Electric Lady* (2013), another song from the Metropolis Trilogy. Carpenter defines *tinted whiteface* as an intentionally unnatural racial performance that “underscores the constructed nature of imagined whiteness, thereby suggesting the possibility of racial mixture and/or the impossibility of racial purity.”⁶⁴ The music video for this song first starts with a monologue delivered by a sonically white speaker (later confirmed by their appearance on a monitor) accompanied by classical western art music diegetically playing in the background. We are introduced to a museum, the “Living Museum where legendary rebels throughout history are frozen in suspended animation,” an obvious reference to Cindi’s ArchAndroid ability to time travel. The camera cuts to the suspended

⁶³ Faedra Chatard Carpenter. *Coloring Whiteness: Acts of Critique in Black Performance*. *Coloring Whiteness* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 26.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

rebels, the first frames resting on the bodies of two figures covered in white, chalky powder. (see Figure 4)



Figure 3: Beyoncé in the music video “Mine” from Beyoncé (2013) cradling the head of a one whose entire body is painted synthetic white, enacting optic whiteface, a racial performance that is only further emphasized by the whiteface mask in Beyoncé’s left hand.



Figure 4: Two rebels frozen in suspended animation, enacting tinted whiteface in the music video “Q.U.E.E.N.” from The Electric Lady (2013).

As Cindi gets ready to take to the stage in “Many Moons,” she turns off her optic whiteface and powers on her Blackness. She then frantically dances between styles that allude to James Brown, Michael Jackson, and Prince. Just as she literally turns on her Blackness to become who the audience expects her to be, she desperately negotiates between performance signifiers of Blackness as though she must be all Black stereotypes to all people.

Musicologist Nina Sun Eidsheim theorizes what it means for a voice to “be Black” in America. According to Eidsheim’s formulation, the voice is collective, the voice is cultural, and the voice’s source comes from the listener. In other words, the voice is defined solely outside of itself.⁶⁵ The audio-vocal dialectic, wherein the voice is constructed only in terms of how it is understood by the listener, is what Eidsheim calls the *thick event*. “Many Moons” sonically evokes Blackness through this dialectic, but also with the instrumentation that plays in the background while the auctioneer introduces the android product.⁶⁶ Once Cindi Mayweather does start to sing, the homorhythmic vocal harmonies that join her stylistically gesture towards gospel choir, but this is an inference primarily made by the audience who looks upon the choir of droids, rows of Cindi Mayweather look-alikes, accompanied by a keyboard set to electric organ, adding to the thick event that is sonic Black church. The cultural constructedness of sonic and visual Blackness is further emphasized by rows of identical Cindi androids flanked in organized formation behind the auction stage, waiting to be sold. They sing in a chordal texture “Your freedom’s in a bind.” They project their sentiment outward, but it is an obvious indictment of their own servitude to the bourgeois non-droid flesh bodies that have purchasing power over their android selves.

The troubled nature and clear dissonance of the emotion picture whole—the music, vocality, and lyrics—work to complicate Cindi Mayweather’s message and blur the distinction between the alter ego and the artist, Janelle Monáe. Through Cindi Mayweather, Monáe circumvented post-racial rhetoric with a metaphor too thin to veil its true meaning. Monáe’s creation of a story concerning the illegality of love between android and human is an obvious metaphor for the historical restriction of miscegenation, the interbreeding of people considered to be of different

65 Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Duke University Press, 2019), 9.

66 *Ibid.*, 5.

racism, in the United States. In contemporary times, the story of Cindi Mayweather is a commentary on the regulation of non-normative people and their intimate attachments.

2.3 Cindi Mayweather's Subversion Through Queer Dandyism

Cindi Mayweather, and consequently Monáe herself, has been understood by some fans and scholars as adhering to respectability politics.⁶⁷ The main evidence offered as support for this stance is her modest mode of dress: a black and white suit. (see Figure 5). In this line of argument, her austere dress and the absence of sexually explicit lyrics in her music form a meaningful contrast with such unrespectable, “ratchet” artists as Nicki Minaj and Cardi B.⁶⁸



Figure 5: Janelle Monáe (or Cindi Mayweather) in “Many Moons,” dressed in her iconic black and white suit.

⁶⁷ Bengal, R. (2018, February 22). *'You don't own or control me': Janelle Monáe on her music, politics and undefinable sexuality*. The Guardian. Retrieved March 8, 2022, from <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/feb/22/you-dont-own-or-control-me-janelle-monae-on-her-music-politics-and-undefinable-sexuality>

⁶⁸ For more on the respectable/ratchet dichotomy amongst Black women of popular culture, see Ashley Payne, “The Cardi B–Beyoncé Complex: Ratchet Respectability and Black Adolescent Girlhood.” *The Journal of hip hop studies* 7, no. 1 (July 1, 2020): 26–116; “Undisciplining the Black Pussy: Pleasure, Black Feminism, and Sexuality in Issa Rae’s *Insecure*,” *The Black Scholar* 50, no. 2 (2020): 5-15.

Even though Mon  e has explicitly disavowed respectability, her early *alter egoing* through Cindi Mayweather appears to blur the boundary between respectability and dis-respectability politics, destabilizing the binary rather than entirely overturning it. Inscribing respectability politics onto Mon  e presupposes heterosexuality and monogamy, two social norms that Cindi Mayweather in fact never overtly contradicts (though these norms are later directly flouted by Mon  e's Jane⁶⁹). Cindi Mayweather's assumed monogamy and the heteronormative presentation of her romantic attachment may unwittingly align Mon  e's early *alter egoing* with homonormativity, a queer kind of respectability.⁷⁰

Respectability politics has been a useful strategy of survival for Black Americans in the United States, but to reiterate Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's point, Black women's adherence to respectability does not promise freedom from oppression. Aisha Durham, Brittney C. Cooper, and Susana M. Morris identify the potential political progress that is undercut by respectability politics because of its employment of surveillance, control and repression that reinscribes white capitalist heteropatriarchy.⁷¹ Understanding respectability politics as an instrument of heteronormative regulation and homonormative self-regulation, Carmel Ohman goes so far as to call respectability politics an anti-Black and misogynist disciplinary mechanism, a *misogynoir* mechanism.⁷²

Aside from Mon  e's explicit denial of respectability politics and her accusation of such a label as an attempt to police her queer Blackness, features of her *alter egoing* counter the premises of respectability. First, respectability politics was used to differentiate "proper" middle class Black

⁶⁹ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

⁷⁰ Homonormativity is the replication and performance of heteronormative ideals, such as monogamy and cisgenderism), among homosexual people. See, Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson, *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); David M. Halperin, (2012). *How To Be Gay* (Cambridge, Massachusetts): 441.

⁷¹ Aisha Durham, Brittney C. Cooper, and Susana M. Morris, "The Stage Hip-Hop Feminism Built: A New Directions Essay." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38, no. 3 (2013): 724–725.

⁷² Carmel Ohman, "Undisciplining the Black Pussy: Pleasure, Black Feminism, and Sexuality in Issa Rae's *Insecure*." *The Black Scholar: At the Limits of Desire: Black Radical Pleasure* 50, no. 2 (2020): 10.

people from the poor working class. Monáe's signature black and white is worn as an homage to the poor working class, by evoking the uniform used by those in service industries.⁷³ Furthermore, the tux that Monáe dons contradicts respectability's heteronormative regulation through its temporally queer and gender-ambiguous references. Although Monáe is femme-presenting for most of the Awards season, Cindi Mayweather's various black and white outfits mix styles from 18th century fashion to 1950s fashion, and the cut of the tuxes lean towards a soft butch or stud aesthetic.⁷⁴

Monáe's early signature look is an essential key to understanding her subversive, queer nature that was not made explicit until the release of *Dirty Computer*. Her mode of dress aligns with a queer icon of the 1930s, another Black performer known for her gender-queer costume of the suit, Gladys Bentley. Bentley's use of the suit and its anachronistic labelling as queer is connected to the practice of Black dandyism. A.J. Hamilton describes Black dandyism as a "sartorial aesthetic rooted in fine clothing and tailoring, a cosmopolitan sensibility, and a sophisticated affinity for culture and art" which practically materialized as the three-piece suit.⁷⁵ Black dandyism was used by early twentieth-century Black men to combat harmful stereotypes.

⁷³ Rebecca Bengal, (2018, February 22). "You don't own or control me': Janelle Monáe on her music, politics and undefinable sexuality," *The Guardian*. Retrieved March 8, 2022, from <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/feb/22/you-dont-own-or-control-me-janelle-monae-on-her-music-politics-and-undefinable-sexuality>

⁷⁴ In the following chapter, I further explore respectability politics, specifically in light of Beyoncé's ultra-visual heteronormative, nuclear family. In Oneka Labennett essay on *Lemonade* and Jay-Z's *4:44*, Beyoncé's output and the artist herself is understood as trapped in the "glass closet" wherein black interiority is exposed and impinged and where ideologies of race and gender pathologize the black family, see Oneka Labennett, "Beyoncé and Her Husband": Representing Infidelity and Kinship in a Black Marriage," *differences* (1 September 2018), 29 (2): 154–188. In my analysis of Beyoncé's transition from a single lady to married with children is preceded by a shift in her alter ego practice Sasha Fierce. I will examine how both Monáe and Beyoncé as racialized artists attempt to use anti-respectability and or post-identities to negotiate bodily sovereignty in a world that confines, erases, and at the very worst destroys Black women.

⁷⁵ A. J. Hamilton, (2015). *Black Marvelous: An Examination of the Carnavalesque in African American Visual Culture* (Order No. 3716528). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (1710778460). Pp. 48-49 Retrieved from <http://pitt.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.pitt.idm.oclc.org/docview/1710778460?accountid=14709>

Through their dandyism Black men exhibited refinement and cosmopolitanism in hopes to dispel the belief that they were by default uneducated and savage. Their mode of dress and specifically the perceived all-consuming interest in their own lovely masculinity was hoped to give the impression to onlookers of a lack of interest in women, which worked against the rapacious Black man stereotype.

This very brief summary of Black dandyism seems to apply more readily to the frequent musical collaborator of Wondaland, the “classic man” Jidenna, than to Monáe herself. However, according to Hamilton’s study on the semiotics of the suit, Black dandyism and the queering of it by Black women has its own resistance history. It is important to note that the masculine strategy of Black dandyism was firmly situated in the practice of critical race theorists, or “race men.” The critical race studies canon is populated by such Black dandies as W.E.B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, and in contemporary times, Cornel West. In Hazel Carby’s work on race men, she records West’s implicit erasure of Black women when he states that “unless Black intellectuals affect the demeanor and attire of the Victorian male in his dark three-piece suit, they will remain marginal and impotent!”⁷⁶ Within this visual rhetoric that aligns suited masculinity with epistemological prowess, Monáe’s sartorial wearing of the suit queers this strategy and carves a distinct space for deviant participation in Black intellectual elitism. Furthermore, both of these women’s mixture of icons—Bentley’s pairing of the top hat and suit with a skirt and heels, and Monáe’s mix of 18th-century and 1950s fashion—calls attention to the “process of reading and being read.”⁷⁷ This queering of Black dandyism is an oppositional gaze of sorts that at once returns the Black dandy gaze upon itself and forces acknowledgement of female dandies.

⁷⁶ Hazel Carby. *Race Men*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 6.

⁷⁷ Anne Stavney, "Cross-Dressing Harlem, Re-Dressing Race" *Women's Studies* 28 (1999), 139.

Another of Hamilton's astute observations of Bentley provides insight into the emancipatory potential of Cindi Mayweather suited *alter egoing*: "Her dandyism rejected the dominant fashion culture's primitivist fetishization of the Black female body and rejected the Black intelligentsia's view of racial progress as a masculine-centered endeavor."⁷⁸ In the spirit of Bentley's co-option of the three-piece suit as both rejecting the current culture's fetishization of the Black female body and refusing the Harlem Renaissance's male-centric view of racial progress, Monáe maintains that she will not be restricted by heterosexist norms and that her music serves to "[weed] out folks who tried to place me in their little, safe category."⁷⁹ Respectability being one of those safe categories, which her mode of dress contradicts, as her iconic black and white suit pays homage to service workers and participates in queer dandyism.

2.4 Cindi Mayweather and the Implicit Whiteness of Posthumanism

Monáe's practice of using an otherworldly alter ego in the *Metropolis Suites* and its alien androgyny forces her into dialogue with posthumanism, with white queer artists and their alien alter egos, and male Afrofuturist alter egos. Monáe's reliance on the alien android connects her to posthumanist discourse, particularly Donna Haraway's essay "A Cyborg Manifesto." Posthumanism, and specifically Haraway's cyberfeminism, subconsciously presupposes whiteness in its reliance on universalizing rhetoric. In Haraway's cyborg theory she suggests that feminists should move beyond naturalism and essentialism, criticizing feminist tactics as "identity

⁷⁸ A. J. Hamilton, (2015). Black Marvelous: An Examination of the Carnavalesque in African American Visual Culture (Order No. 3716528): 58-59.

⁷⁹ Terry Gross, (2020, May 18). Janelle Monáe Wants To Represent The Underdog - In Music And Onscreen. Retrieved January 08, 2021, from <https://www.npr.org/2020/05/18/856841290/janelle-mon-e-wants-to-represent-the-underdog-in-music-and-onscreen>

politics” that victimize those excluded, and she proposes that it is better strategically to confuse identities.⁸⁰ Haraway’s unmarked whiteness, and the probability of it as going unfelt by the theorist, allows her to call for non-essentialized metaphors in the name of coalition.⁸¹ Haraway’s cyborg morphology comes at great cost (most notably the erasure of Afrofuturism) for women of color who rely on Black sisterhoods and afro-ancestral lineages and mythologies.

Cindi Mayweather’s *alter egoing* is also imperfectly grouped with white artists who use alien alter egos. I’ve already noted the ways that Cindi Mayweather’s heteronormative, “respectable” presentation is subverted by subtle signifiers of queerness. Cindi Mayweather is further removed from heteronormativity by her otherworldly, alien nature. Cindi’s alienness aligns her with the queer practice of such artists as avant garde countertenor Klaus Nomi and glam rocker David Bowie. In the words of author Alex Benson of *Medium*,

“The alien metaphor repackages a queer experience for mass consumption in a straight world — a red herring encasing a secret message to social misfits everywhere. It wraps aesthetic intention around behaviors and body language usually mocked. It’s not gay, it’s avant-garde.”⁸²

Cindi Mayweather’s connection to white gender-bending figures is a one-dimensional link. These figures (Nomi and Bowie) needed the alien metaphor to operate in a straight world. Monáe, a queer Black woman, contrived an alien, android alter ego that is as oppressed in Metropolis as her creator is in the real world.

⁸⁰ Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York; Routledge, 1991), 149-181.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Alex Benson, "The Alien Metaphor: Queer Identity In Modern Music." *Medium* (April 29, 2019). Accessed May 22, 2019. <https://medium.com/loopandreplay/the-alien-metaphor-f1045ec1ba2a>.

Despite the critical difference between a white man's androgyny and Monáe's intersectional queering of the alter ego, Bowie and his alter ego is one of her inspirations, as evidenced by her 2018 post on Instagram:

Thinking of you my Ziggy Stardust moonage dream. Even in your ascension to another frequency you still manage to guide me, and all of us who you inspire. You continue to teach me what freedom looks like through the gifts you left behind. You continue to help me and so many feel comfortable during some of our most vulnerable and fearful moments. I often find myself asking, "What would Bowie say, what would he do?" and I just go with that.⁸³

Apparently, Janelle Monáe answered the question "WWBD?" (What would Bowie do?) and Cindi Mayweather emerged. It isn't hard to see the similarities between David Bowie's Ziggy Stardust and Janelle Monáe's Cindi Mayweather: they both figure as messiah, they both bring a message of hope through song, they both come from another planet, they both are queer subjects. The key difference between Ziggy Stardust and Cindi Mayweather is the subtextual Du Boisian struggle of the *Metropolis Suites*.

Although futuristic alter egos (specifically from the 1970s funk and glam rock scene) have functioned as a way to create alternate realities that are hospitable to queer bodies and temporalities—such as George Clinton's Starchild and Dr. Funkenstein, Lou Reed's the Phantom of Rock, and the aforementioned Ziggy Stardust—the reality crafted for Cindi Mayweather is not a hospitable world free of oppression. Janelle Monáe's *alter egoing* does not create a more inclusive world, but rather, illuminates the injustices of the real world. Cindi Mayweather did not function as a suspension of reality but an emphasis of the universality of violence on all "those who are marginalized."⁸⁴

⁸³ Janelle Monáe, Instagram Post. January 10, 2018. <http://smarturl.it/JanelleBowieInsta>

⁸⁴ Exclusive Interview, "Janelle Monáe Says 'Q.U.E.E.N.' Is for the 'Ostracized & Marginalized.'" Accessed October 27, 2020. <https://www.fuse.tv/videos/2013/09/janelle-monae-queen-interview>.

Earlier iterations of alter egos, especially from the funk and glam genres, function as performative affirmations of post-human identity, but at this early stage of Monáe's *alter egoing* such affirmation was not a part of her world-building schema of Metropolis. Contrary to Monáe's claim to all-inclusive representation, I argue that the story of Cindi Mayweather emphasizes how Black women do not or are not able to perform separate from their intersectional identities, alter egos notwithstanding.⁸⁵ Rather than crafting a more hospitable reality, Cindi's narrative subverts oppressive forces by exposing its violence, both subtle and extreme.

Thus, Cindi the alien android circulates in what would seem to be the Obama world of Janelle Monáe, with *alter egoing* that responds to the supposed post-raciality of the US in her self-denial of the racialized body, and yet unable to uncouple herself from racialization. The tenuous omission of race from Janelle Monáe's first version of *alter egoing* in turn becomes an Afropessimist commentary on the negation of the Black body.⁸⁶ Monáe expressed universality through the android narrative, and yet preserved her own Blackness by using examples of oppression specific to her community.

2.5 Cindi Mayweather's Afropessimist Political Affect

Afropessimism has a couple of different definitions. Scholar of African American studies, Frank Wilderson describes Afropessimism as a theoretical positioning of Black people as

⁸⁵ Monica Bradley, "Glam Rock and Funk Alter-Egos, Fantasy, and the Performativity of Identities" *Revista de Lenguas Moderna*; San José Iss. 26, (2017): 387-401.

⁸⁶ Exclusive Interview, "Janelle Monáe Says 'Q.U.E.E.N.' Is for the 'Ostracized & Marginalized.'" Accessed October 27, 2020. <https://www.fuse.tv/videos/2013/09/janelle-monae-queen-interview>.

structural props, with the sole purpose of fulfilling white and non-Black fantasies.⁸⁷ Cindi Mayweather's purported universality is strangely wedded to both sonic and visual signifiers of Blackness, a coupling that invokes a pessimism that seems to suggest that not all oppression is analogous to anti-Blackness. Cindi Mayweather's cognitive dissonance thus becomes a metaphor for how Black people are "positioned, contained, and punished, both excluded from and necessary to the category of the Human."⁸⁸ I understand this form of *alter egoing* as not just promoting Afropessimism, but a politicized affect, an affective strategy stemming from Afropessimism, an Afropessimist orientation that contrasts with Obama's audacious hope.

In politicizing the term affect, most obviously in the use of the terms *political affect* or *affective politics*, I use these terms by way of Jennifer C. Nash's definition of, "how bodies are organized around intensities, longings, desires, temporalities, repulsions, curiosities, fatigues, optimism, and how these affects produce political movements (or sometimes inertias)."⁸⁹ To reiterate, Obama developed his own affective brand of hope, a signature optimistic politics to which Monáe's *alter egoing* reacts. Thus, the evolution of Cindi Mayweather demonstrates how shared, social feelings evolve according to contemporary political events.⁹⁰

Cindi Mayweather's assessment of freedom in "Many Moons" with the lyrics, "Your freedom's in a bind," strikes a dissonant chord in what some have called the era of post-race audacious hopefulness in America. The dissonance only increased with the crucial rise in awareness of police brutality only weeks into Obama's administration. In January 2009 in Oakland, California Johannes Mehserle, a transit officer shot the 22-year-old unarmed Black man

⁸⁷ Frank B. Wilderson, *Red, White & Black : Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. Durham [NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

⁸⁸ Winters, J. (2020, September 18). *Afropessimism's contributions to Black Studies*. AAIHS. Retrieved February 5, 2022, from <https://www.aaihs.org/afropessimisms-contributions-to-black-studies/>

⁸⁹ Jennifer Nash, "Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-politics, and Post-intersectionality," *Meridians* 11.2 (2011): 3.

⁹⁰ Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies." *Social text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 121

Oscar Grant. The brutality of the murder, a young man, handcuffed and lying face down on the public transportation platform, extinguished much of the optimism generated from the Democratic win of the White House. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor writes in *The Guardian*:

The optimism that coursed through Black America in 2008 seemed a million miles away.[...]As for President Obama, he turned out to be very different from candidate Obama, who had stage-managed his campaign to resemble something closer to a social movement. He had conjured much hope, especially among African Americans – but with great expectations came even greater disappointments.⁹¹

Having a Black president does not automatically eradicate racism in the United States or validate the claim that America is postracial, a fact emphasized by the widely publicized murder of a Black man at the hands of a white serviceman. In an obvious address to the contemporary political environment that proved the fallacy of a post-racial America, Cindi Mayweather pleads in her song “Mr. President, singing,”

Hey Mr. President,
Don't you see the hurt in their eyes?
So much disappointment in many faces
Use your heart and not your pride
We can't go on and keep pretending.

Despite the critique that Cindi Mayweather is a protagonist packaged for the masses, her obvious critique of Obama, a Black man who has become a beacon of hope to many aspiring people of color, counters the idea that she is a mere neoliberal cog in the American political landscape. Black women have been traditionally discouraged from bringing Black men to task due to “the indignities of life in a racist society,” as explained by Kimberlé Crenshaw, and they’ve

⁹¹ Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, (2017, January 13) “Barack Obama's Original Sin: America's Post-racial Illusion.” Retrieved January 08, 2021, from <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/13/barack-obama-legacy-racism-criminal-justice-system>

been encouraged to “protect the home against assaults outside the home.”⁹² Where Black women have been discouraged from harshly critiquing Black men because of America’s system of racism that is swift to accuse, sentence, and incarcerate Black men, Cindi Mayweather provides a fair critique that neither takes away from Obama’s feat of becoming the first non-white president, nor skirts around his neglect of those who have been negatively impacted during his tenure.

2.6 Jane57821’s Critical Optimism in Response to White (Male) Nostalgia

Some criticisms of Afropessimism include its nominal pessimistic bent and its US-centrism. It is contended that Afropessimism subverts the kind of actionable hope that builds the coalition needed in the fight against anti-Blackness. Afropessimism tends to conflate Blackness and the history of chattel slavery in the US, thus erasing other Black freedom struggles that do not stem from US history of slavery.⁹³ In my invocation of *critical optimism*, I do not intend to disable the utility of Afropessimism. In my analysis of Jane57821 I understand Monáe’s *critical optimism* as informed by the Afropessimist tradition but reacting to the tug and pull of politicized affects in the Obama/post-Obama era. It is interesting that just as Monáe became more specific in her *alter egoing* via *Dirty Computer*’s Jane57821, with such lyrics as “Black girl magic,” she promotes an orientation of *critical optimism*, which stands in contrast to Cindi Mayweather’s Afropessimism.

As mentioned in the Introduction, affect is frequently invoked in political culture (e.g. shame evoked by President Bush’s response to Hurricane Katrina). The evolution of Monáe’s *alter*

⁹² Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241. doi:10.2307/1229039.

⁹³ Greg Thomas, "Afro-Blue Notes: The Death of Afro-pessimism (2.0)?" *Theory & Event* 21, no. 1 (2018): 282-317. muse.jhu.edu/article/685979.

egoing maps the affective terrain of the Obama/post-Obama era. The shift from Cindi Mayweather to Jane57824 happened simultaneously with the shift in rhetorics of hope and nostalgia circulating in electoral politics and seemed to expose how these politicized affects align some subjects with others and against some others.⁹⁴ Moreover, Monée’s shift from Afropessimism in the era of Obamian hope to *critical optimism* during a time of acute white (male) nostalgia exposes how emotions move between body-politics.⁹⁵

Whereas Cindi Mayweather acted as an Afropessimist critique of Obama’s audacious hope and belief in America as post-racial, Jane57821 confronts Trump’s white (male) nostalgia with *critical optimism*. As described in the “Introduction,” *Critical optimism* is an affective strategy that stands in contrast to the US political affective context of nostalgia for the past and pessimistic mourning for the future.

As explained in the Introduction chapter, the performative political practice of *critical optimism* that I theorize through Monée’s *alter egoing* is influenced by Leboeuf’s interrogation of Obama’s audacious hope (2019), Berlant’s analysis of political affect and genre (2011), and Snediker’s queer optimism (2006). In combining these theories, I understand *alter egoing* as the practice of crafting a unique narrative wherein artists who are Black women can defy the futures and outcomes that have been designated to them.

The function of Monée’s *alter egoing* shifts from Cindi Mayweather to Jane57821 as her oeuvre matures from the *Metropolis Suites* to *Dirty Computer*. The same postmodern, intertextual complexity of the *Metropolis Suites* that references cultural works as wide-ranging as the 1928

⁹⁴ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 118. For more on affect and the socio-political, see Sara Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” *Social text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 121. She gives the definition that affect is a “social feelings that are shaped by specific political events and socio-political environments.”

⁹⁵ Margaret Hunter and Alhelí Cuenca, “Nicki Minaj and the Changing Politics of Hip-Hop: Real Blackness, Real Bodies, Real Feminism?” *Feminist Formations* 29, no. 2 (2017): 26–46.

German expressionist film *Metropolis* to Lewis Carroll's novel *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) are again present in *Dirty Computer*. These references range from Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* to speeches by Malcolm X and Martin Luther King.⁹⁶ By way of *alter egoing*, Monáe negotiates pessimism and optimism through intimate stories of state-condemned deviance and the violence of surveillance.

When it comes to identity, specifically identity-oriented analysis, the naming of characters and persons is of utmost importance. What one calls another, or what one calls themselves has the potential to limit or expand the essence of who they are. There may be some confusion when analyzing certain characters in Monáe's works, like "Django Jane," as she can be understood to be both a new side to Jane57821 and a new alter ego altogether. I will not attempt to mitigate this instability of identity, but rather to embrace the resonances and dissonances of multivalent identifications through *alter egoing*.

A decade after the release of the EP *Metropolis*, Monáe refurbished her alter ego into Jane57821, the protagonist of her 2018 album and short film *Dirty Computer*. Instead of a technological android that is sentenced for disassembly, Jane57821 is a human girl who refuses to follow the rules of an authoritarian government and is consequently captured and brainwashed. In the *Metropolis Suites*, the narrative of deviancy and punishment is associated with Cindi's lack of a human body, whereas in the case of Jane, her human body, her very flesh is implicated, even with an entire song dedicated to her deviant vagina. In short, Cindi Mayweather is universal insofar as she uses race as a technology to meet the expectations of those around her. Jane57821, on the other hand, is "highly melanated," fleshy and specific, one-hundred percent authentic "Black girl

⁹⁶ Starring Jamie Foxx. The referentiality of "Django Jane" is two-deep in that *Django Unchained* refers to the 1966 film *Django* in which a main character (not the title character) is a mixed-race prostitute.

magic.”⁹⁷ Emphasizing Jane’s body as “highly melanated” and labelling her flesh a “dirty computer” puts Monáe’s most recent alter ego in direct conversation with Afropessimism’s heuristic strategy of diagnosing how Black folks are excluded from and a necessary to the category of the Human in a white supremacist world.

“They started calling us computers,” Monáe’s disembodied voice informs us at the beginning of *Dirty Computer*, “People began vanishing and the cleaning began.” Instead of the *Metropolis Suites*’ mythic tale of time travel, *Dirty Computer* gives us an intimate story of dystopian erasure. In the ensuing plot, two white men analyze the “dirty” memories of Jane, a Black woman, and the cleansing they perform highlights an anxiety over her racial construction, her polyamorous sexuality and gender expression. It is interesting that Cindi is implicated for her android body, whereas Jane is criminalized for her gender and sexuality, things that are so intimately tied to the flesh. And yet, as Jane is implicated for her fleshiness, she is condemned as a “dirty computer.” This seems to be an about-face from the expectations of the previous world in which Cindi was the criminal. It is as though Janelle Monáe, through these two iterations of her alter ego, is creating alternate worlds that express the damned-if-you-do-damned-if-you-don’t double bind of queer Black womanhood.⁹⁸ Monáe’s first EP was released just prior to the 2008 election, a time in which the election of the first Black president inspired post-racial, post-racist optimism. *Dirty Computer* was released in a drastically different socio-political climate, with “MAGA” rhetoric, mounting white supremacist terrorism and hyper visibility of police brutality.

⁹⁷ Lyrics from “Django Jane.”

⁹⁸ This double bind has been theorized by Frances Beal’s concept of “double jeopardy” that articulates how race and gender affect the lives of black women by compounding oppression (1969). Deborah King added class to the double jeopardy formulation, renaming it *multiple jeopardy* (1988). Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* (2002) gives a cinematic/visual dimension to this double bindedness with her concept of *controlling images* that distinguish damaging stereotypes of black women (e.g., the mammie, the matriarch) that oppress and constrain the lives of real black women.

In Mon  e’s first studio album, *The ArchAndroid*, we learn that Cindi Mayweather is an android prototype being displayed at an auction where other androids of her model are being sold on the blackmarket to the highest bidder. In the *Metropolis Suites*, we traverse time and witness Cindi Mayweather use race as a technology to critique class oppression; the antagonists are racially diverse, but always bear upper class signifiers. Rather than time travel, *Dirty Computer* traverses temporalities via Jane’s memories, and the function of these memories, rather than providing commentary on class difference, highlight her inescapable Blackness and her queer womanhood (or femaleness), both of which are under attack by the presiding totalitarian regime.

When we are first introduced to Jane57821, she is lying helpless on an inspection table. Through a loudspeaker, she is instructed, “You will repeat after me. Your [sic] name is Jane57821. I am a dirty computer. I am ready to be cleaned.” The voice over the loudspeaker is implicitly white, and so as Jane refuses to repeat the self-indicting phrase, we witness Janelle Mon  e’s interpretation of Frantz Fanon’s “third-person consciousness” when he says in *Black Skin, White Masks*:

And then the occasion arose when I had to meet the white man’s eyes. An unfamiliar weight burdened me. The real world challenged my claims. In the white world the [person] of color encounters difficulties in the development of [their] body schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness.⁹⁹

The story goes on to follow two white men searching through Jane’s memories and deleting those that feature Black female eroticism and gender negotiation.

Janelle Mon  e dropped “Django Jane,” the second single released from *Dirty Computer*, on February 22, 2018. The song visually positions Mon  e as matriarch, monarch, general, and CEO. It is interesting, and a bit ironic, that this song that puts “Black girl magic” on display and

⁹⁹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 83.

emphasizes Black woman empowerment visually and lyrically, comes from a place of felt precarity. When asked what inspired “Django Jane,” Monáe confides, “It was in response to me feeling the sting of the threats being made to my rights as a woman, as a Black woman, as a sexually liberated woman, even just as a daughter with parents who have been oppressed for many decades.”¹⁰⁰ In this statement Monáe re-articulates a concept that Fanon describes as living in *triple personhood* (different from *third person consciousness* of the previous quote). This triple personhood is the burden of responsibility for one’s body, race, and ancestors. Monáe adds an additional layer of responsibility as her *alter egoing* is not relegated to the past or the present, but the future. As our heroine raps in “Django Jane” she is surrounded by a posse of Black panther-like ladies. In a suit and heels, she sits atop a throne, her crown a kufi cap.

Jane⁵⁷⁸²¹ *alter egoing* articulates a strategy for navigating a world in triple personhood. Monáe’s strategy differs from other rappers, such as Nicki Minaj and Cardi B who tend towards parody, irreverence and ratchetness.¹⁰¹ Neither does Janelle Monáe entirely embody respectability politics, her suit and tie notwithstanding. Monáe blurs the lines between the ratchet and the respectable, producing a defiant, *critical optimism*.

Monáe’s *critical optimism* operates on a belief in the inevitability of queer Black womanhood. On some level, this optimism of Black women’s future despite the current oppression suffered is similar to Beyoncé’s “Formation” in her visual album *Lemonade*, which will be analyzed at length later in the dissertation. Both songs celebrate Black women, Black feminists and Black feminism. They both include Black girl squads, with both singers as matriarch. Unlike

¹⁰⁰ Rebecca Bengal, “‘You Don’t Own Or Control Me’: Janelle Monáe on Her Music, Politics and Undefinable Sexuality.” *The Guardian*. Retrieved March 8, 2018.

¹⁰¹ Janell Hobson, “Remnants of Venus: Signifying Black Beauty and Sexuality” Vol. 46 (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2018); Carmel Ohman, “Undisciplining the Black Pussy: Pleasure, Black Feminism, and Sexuality in Issa Rae’s *Insecure*,” *The Black Scholar* 50, no. 2 (2020): 7; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

“Formation,” however, “Django Jane” speaks not of revenge or the power of money. Even though Django Jane starts the song with a list of tangible economic hurdles and feats, her main focus is the freedom of her female body. Jane ends with the command: “Take a seat, you are not involved. Hit the mute button, let the vagina have a monologue.” Cindi Mayweather uses her robotic dance moves and funk-infused grooves to subvert class oppression and to question normative sexual structures of intimacy, via allegory and metaphor. Jane57821 takes it a step further: she removes the veil and explicitly states that she is a Black girl from Kansas City, whose very body—her vagina and ability to give life—is being policed by men.

2.7 Janelle Monáe and Her Flaw in Critical Optimism

Janelle Monáe takes the literalism—“let the vagina have a monologue”—one step further in another of Jane57821’s memories under inspection, the song “Pynk.” Two months after “Django Jane” was released “Pynk” was uploaded to Janelle Monáe’s YouTube channel. The lowlight, serious aura of “Django Jane” was exchanged for a pink infrared and ultra-femme aesthetic. The overall aesthetic and timbre of “Pynk” greatly contrast with “Django Jane.” Janelle Monáe raps the entirety of “Django Jane,” whereas in “Pynk” she sweetly sings in her upper middle register. These contrasts notwithstanding, the two songs are united by their vagina monologue motif. The vagina pants dance sequence in “Pynk” is in direct response to “Django Jane’s” command, “let the vagina have a monologue.” (see Figure 6 and 7) Although the album is in the genre of dystopia, “Pynk” is brimming with erotic feminine and female metaphors that create a stark contrast to the dark subject matter that is the policing of women’s bodies.



Figure 6: Vagina monologue in music video “Django Jane.”



Figure 7: Vagina pants in music video “Pynk.”

The first musical texture in “Pynk” is a bodily act: snapping fingers. As a pink car comes to a stop at a motel, a woman stands to greet Jane57821: one arm akimbo, the other snapping twice. First, we see just one woman snap, but soon others join in. The meaning of the snap is dynamic. It can be used to signal a retort, or express approval. In *Dirty Computer*, snapping is a non-vocal musical expression. The finger snap is often a signifier of agency. Its allowance of participation empowers those who would rather not participate vocally. The snaps of the women at the Pynk motel are acts of communal response. But more than that, the snapping of the fingers draws attention to tactility and gives way to the body surface as a theoretical medium. In looking at Black women’s “disco embodiment/aesthetics,” Samantha Pinto analyzes Black women’s performative surfaces as ways to theorize Black feminist politics and finds new ways to “[imagine] a politics

rooted not in reference to the official, formal spheres of political life—rights, law, public protest, etc.—but in the quotidian and the fantastic registers of Black women’s embodied experiences and presences, in their surfaces themselves.”¹⁰² Like the Sharks’ and Jets’ attempt to “stay cool” amidst the gang conflict in *West Side Story* (1961), the snapping of the women in “Pynk” commands attention.

As these women press their fingers together and snap, we’re given a close shot of the phrase “I grab back” stitched in pink on the front of a pair of white briefs. The song’s endearing celebration of Black female eroticism is an act of resistance, the countdown of a ticking clock. Amidst the cheeky world of “Pynk” we are reminded of the real world dystopia, that is, quotidian misogyny. The pulse of the snaps lasts until the very last line of the song, a steady, unyielding protest enacted from the body. Rather than passive acceptance of misogyny these women use their bodies, the very thing that is pitted against them, to sonically and visual express critical optimism.

In the tradition of Janelle Monáe, “Pynk” is not a one-dimensional anthem about women’s biology, but rather an exploration of the life of Jane, a queer woman of color. Janelle Monáe came

¹⁰² There is a long list of scholars who theorize visual cultures and theories of Black surface. These include: Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Racial Icons* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015); Daphne A. Brooks, “‘All That You Can’t Leave Behind’: Black Female Soul Singing and the Politics of Surrogation in the Age of Catastrophe,” *Meridians* 8, no. 1 (2008): 180–204; Daphne A. Brooks, *Bodies of Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850–1910* (Durham: Duke UP, 2006); Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* (New York: New York UP, 2015); Uri McMillan, “Introduction: skin, surface, sensorium,” (2018): 1–15; Krista A. Thompson, *Shine* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Michelle Stephens, *Skin Acts* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Soyica Diggs Colbert, *Black Movements: Performance and Cultural Politics* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2017); Tanisha C. Ford, *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of the Soul* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2015); Tanisha C. Ford, “‘Beysthetics’: ‘Formation’ and the Politics of Style,” in *The Lemonade Reader*. Kinitra D. Brooks and Kamellah L. Martin, eds. (London: Routledge, 2019); Shane Vogel, *The scene of Harlem cabaret: Race, sexuality, performance* (University of Chicago Press, 2009); Shane Vogel, *Stolen Time: Black Fad Performance and the Calypso Craze* (University of Chicago Press, 2018); Deborah Paredez, “Lena Horne and Judy Garland: Divas, Desire, and Discipline in the Civil Rights Era,” *TDR/The Drama Review* 58.4 (2014): 105–119; Madison Moore, *Fabulous: The Rise of the Beautiful Eccentric*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2018; Cheng, Anne A. *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface*. New York: Oxford UP, 2011; Anne A. Cheng, “Skin Fashion: Josephine Baker and Dressing Race,” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 37(2015): 6–15; Anne Anlin Cheng, “Skin deep: Josephine Baker and the colonial fetish,” *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 23.3 (69) (2008): 35–79.

out as pansexual the same year that *Dirty Computer* was released, (as disclosed in her *Rolling Stones* cover story).¹⁰³ (see Figure 8) The story in *Dirty Computer* revolves around Jane57821's romantic relationship with a man and a woman, Ché and Zen respectively. Jane and Zen's relationship, however, is the relationship featured most prominently and "Pynk" beautifully illustrates their romance in bubble pop fashion. "Pynk" is not only women-centric, it is women-*only*. *Dirty Computer* includes women, men, and non-binary folk, but "Pynk" is a monologue for the vagina.



Figure 8: Cover of Rolling Stones (Issue 1313/1314 May 17-30, 2018) wherein Janelle Monáe publicly discloses her pansexuality and queer identity.

"Pynk's" equating of vagina with womanhood, however, comes with a set of problems. This brings us back to the costume choice, the vagina pants, or "pussy pants." This costume choice is in direct response to Trump's infamous "grab them by the pussy" comment and also to the political debate over reproductive rights. In an interview with MTV News, Monáe states that the

¹⁰³ Brittany Spanos, "JANELLE MONAE FREES HERSELF." *Rolling Stone*, no. 1313-1314 (May 17, 2018): 34–39.

pussy pants dance sequence featured at the beginning of the song includes women with and without the pants and that “Pynk” is a song that celebrates women in their varieties.¹⁰⁴ She further discloses that the women dancing without the pants signify transwomen. And so, while she may refer to a metaphoric vagina, the act of controlling women’s reproduction only directly affects those with reproductive capabilities: some ciswomen, transmen, and some who are gender non-conforming. So, although this could have a more pointed message regarding reproductive rights and those with literal vaginas, Monáe’s “vagina monologue” conflates gender identity, sexuality and biology.

This conflation renders transmen’s sexual engagements with other men and the possibility of reproduction invisible. This conflation simultaneously and simplistically equates the need for reproductive rights to that of ciswomen. It effectively erases the violence inflicted on transmen by “grab them by the pussy” rhetoric. Ultimately, this ultra-femme call-to-arms falls short of overcoming hegemonic forces that stigmatize transgender embodiment. In other words, Monáe specifically includes women with and without vaginas, but unintentionally excludes transmen and other non-binary people with reproductive capabilities. And despite her references to vaginas, she only includes ciswomen and transwomen in the music video. Thus, Monáe essentially ignores an entire group of people: transmen, non-binary people, and their vaginas.

The pussy pants gesture of inclusivity is a signature of Janelle Monáe; unfortunately, this gesture, by conflating vaginas with femme identities, is only inclusive of some trans identities. In the days of Cindi Mayweather, the android messiah was a catch-all heroine representing all “those who are marginalized.” Precisely because Cindi Mayweather is all-purpose, a white cis-heteronormative man, for example, may identify and claim her music as representing his experience (if indeed he experiences the violence of surveillance). And in that moment of

¹⁰⁴ Patrick Hosken, “Janelle Monae Tell Us How Her 'PYNK' Vagina Pants Are All About Celebrating Variation,” April 13, 2018, <http://www.mtv.com/news/3073447/janelle-monae-pynk-video-breakdown/>.

identification a person who is most privileged may learn to sympathize with a Black non-normative woman who expresses herself through song. Janelle Monáe's attempt at all-inclusivity, from Cindi to Jane, can appear to fall into cultural neoliberal logics, producing heroines that can be consumed by the masses, which Dan Hassler-Forest warns, may run "the risk of separating critique from any specific power formation or set of social relations."¹⁰⁵ Throughout most of *Dirty Computer*, Jane⁵⁷⁸²¹ portrays a non-universal politic. "Pynk's" widespread identification, an attempt at maintaining some of the universality of Cindi Mayweather, is a deviation from the rest of the emotion picture that emphasizes positionality and specificity.

2.8 Janelle Monáe's Critical Optimism in Response to Nationalist Whiteface

Today, I'm Janelle Monáe. Also known as Dirty Computer. Also known as a free ass motherfucka." -Monáe in an interview¹⁰⁶

I'm not America's nightmare/I'm the American Dream/Cross my heart and I hope to die/With a big ol' piece of American pie. —"Americans" in *Dirty Computer*

Monáe is intensely focused on how she is defined—by name, kind or spirit—as evidenced by the quote and lyrics above. The ArchAndroid, Electric Lady, Dirty Computer, these are only a few names that Monáe has given herself. In the final track of *Dirty Computer* Monáe defines herself again: American. As the chorus of the song states, this heroine is an American who wants a piece of the American dream (or "American pie"). Ten years prior to the release of *Dirty Computer*, at the 2008 democratic convention, Jay-Z voiced the belief of many hopeful others that

¹⁰⁵ Dan Hassler-Forest, "The Politics of World Building: Heteroglossia in Janelle Monáe's Afrofuturist WondaLand." In *World Building*, edited by Boni Marta, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 386. doi:10.2307/j.ctt1zkjz0m.24.

¹⁰⁶ Janelle Monáe, "Janelle Monáe Explains Dirty Computer Visuals, What Pansexuality Means to Her, and More!" May 3, 2018, YouTube video, 24:43, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGhNbcIRKfi>

“you can be anything you want to be in the world. Black people are no longer left out of the American dream.”¹⁰⁷ In “Americans,” Monáe sings of the dream that is now available to an American such as herself. In this song Monáe makes an interesting choice in her *alter ego*. In an album that is all about Black womanhood, the final track takes on what I call *nationalist whiteface*. Unlike the music videos “Q.U.E.E.N.” and “Mine” discussed earlier, there is no *optic* or *tinted whiteface* in *Dirty Computer*. Instead, there is *nationalist whiteface* in the final number. I define *nationalist whiteface* as rhetoric that implicitly signifies right-leaning white nationalist Americans; post-2016 *nationalist whiteface* can also be referred to as *MAGA whiteface*.

Monáe’s *nationalist whiteface* is preceded with the roll of credits, as though the visual album has finished. Ominous waves of synth music feed the dystopian ending: Jane, the “dirty computer,” is cleansed and assimilated into the totalitarian system. The credits cut to the patient monitoring chart of Jane’s male romantic partner, Che. The digital chart of his brain activity starts to glitch and in walks Jane’s female romantic partner, Zen. The automatic doors open, she walks into the room, face covered with a gas mask, hands behind her back. The camera turns to Jane⁵⁷⁸²¹ standing over the prostrate Ché, who just moments before was laying on that very same table. Zen informs Ché, “I am here to bring you from the darkness into the light.” Zen tosses gas masks to Jane and Ché and an alternate ending to the story is initiated as a gospel choir offers hope: “Hold on, don’t fight your war alone.” We witness the downfall of the system that worked so hard to cleanse Jane⁵⁷⁸²¹. The non-diegetic chorus of dirty computers declare, “We will win this fight.” Then starts the enactment of *nationalistic whiteface*, a list of phrases that a liberal left American could (would) ascribe to MAGA culture:

I like my woman in the kitchen.
I teach my children superstition.
I keep my two guns on my blue nightstand

¹⁰⁷ Travis L. Gosa and Erik Nielson. *The Hip Hop & Obama Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 5.

A pretty young thang, she can wash my clothes
But she'll never, ever wear my pants.

As an audience informed by contemporary electoral politics in the U.S. listens to Jane57821 declare, "I pledge allegiance to the flag/Learned the words from my mom and dad/Cross my heart and I hope to die/With a big old piece of American pie," a thick event is generated. Although sung by Janelle Monáe, the audience members assess the content and may assume the speech act emanates from an "all American," white body. As the song continues, it is not clear from which vantage point we are supposed to interpret the lyric:

Don't try to take my country
I will defend my land.
I'm not crazy baby, naw,
I'm American.

These lyrics bear a strong right-wing, if not alt-right, sensibility. Perhaps this verse could express how the United States as a whole has progressed for the better, that indeed, the nation has moved away from this protectionist belief system.

More likely, Monáe is performing *nationalist whiteface*, impersonating the right-wing conservative spouting the belief that America, the country that belongs to them (and the accompanying "American Dream" offered) is being taken away (as in Michael Kimmel's critique of white angry men). But, as the song continues, we are brought into someone else's perspective, and they also lay claim to the same America: "Seventy-nine cents to your dollar/All that bullshit from white-collars." These lines from the second verse can be taken up as a response or rebuttal to the first verse and elicit the question, "who is speaking in verse one?" Verse two obviously comes from the perspective of a racialized woman with the lyrics, "Seventy-nine cents to your dollar/ [...] You see my color before my vision/Sometimes I wonder if you were blind/Would it

help you make a better decision?” This obvious point of view could make one assume that verse one is coming from the perspective of a white American man. Black women, however, have not just been targets of white male entitlement, but they have also suffered misogyny at the hands of their own Black community. In just these first two verses, each informing the other, “Americans” presents the intersecting hurdles of Black womanhood, as both women and racialized other.

2.9 Conclusion

Monáe’s Obama-era *alter egoing* manifested as the android, Cindi Mayweather, with unclear origin and convoluted narrative timeline. Cindi Mayweather was rendered a forced metaphor of universality. With the release of the visual album *Dirty Computer* in 2018, Monáe revamped her alter ego into a clearly defined dystopian heroine with a narrative that depended on specificity. Furthermore, Jane57821 makes explicit references to the mounting white (male) nostalgia and anti-Black populism’s of MAGA culture in the era of Trump. I understand the evolution of Janelle Monáe’s *alter egoing* as a reaction to these affective political strategies mobilized in electoral politics, and that the transformation of her alter egos are indicative of shared, social feelings that evolve according to contemporary political events.

From Cindi Mayweather wearing a tux, to Jane57821 dancing in a pair of vagina pants, Monáe’s *alter egoing* outlines the pros and cons of identification that depend on universality and specificity. The subtle and even dissonant nature of Cindi Mayweather *alter egoing* exposes the harm of the post-racial fallacy promoted by American politics circa Obama’s election and at the same time enables a nuanced performance of gender, race, and sexuality. Jane57821’s queer Black female specificity, that somehow also attempts to be a universal icon, inadvertently erases some

kinds of transgender identities. Even with the various pitfalls of Cindi and Jane *alter egoing*, Monáe begins to craft an affective strategy for queer subjects in a heteroracist America. This strategy, *critical optimism*, is a reflexive process wherein the marginalized subject is aware of the material realities which negate their personhood. *Critical optimism* modifies Snediker's queer optimism with a bell hooksian' oppositional stance.¹⁰⁸ Like hooks' political rebellion found in the "looking back" or returned gaze of the racialized subject, *critical optimism* allows Monáe to craft a unique narrative that defies the futures and outcomes that have been designated to queer Black women in a racist, heteropatriarchal society.

¹⁰⁸ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992).

3.0 Nicki Minaj: American Girlhood, Ecstatic Disidentification, Queer Catharsis

3.1 Introduction

Nicki Minaj's *alter egoing* is never more striking then in her critically acclaimed guest verse in "Monster" (Kanye West, *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*, 2010). In the music video, Minaj appears in double, side-by-side as captor and captive. (see Figure 9) Tied to a chair, in a pink wig and white tulle dress, Minaj's Barbie alter ego raps in her upper register, evoking girlish infantilism. Growling and scowling over the innocent Barbie is Roman Zolanski, Minaj's aggressive and angry alter ego, riding whip in hand. The sonic and visual dichotomy displayed in "Monster" can be understood as more than contrasting performance personas. In the context of Minaj's contentious relationship to (white) American girlhood, her *alter egoing* expresses the distinct strain normative expectations of gender, sexuality and race have on an immigrant Black woman who moved to the US as a young girl.



Figure 9: Roman Zolanski (left) and Barbie (right) in "Monster."

In the 2015 documentary, “Nicki Minaj: My Time Again,” Onika Tanya Maraj, who we know as Nicki Minaj, reflects on her transition to the United States from Trinidad. She stands in front of a chain link fence enclosing a modest home in Queens, New York, and she recalls growing up with difficulties specific to immigrant children (e.g. being teased for her accent). She gestures to the house behind her and recounts the “hard times” of her childhood when her entire family had to live in the basement of that small home in Jamaica, Queens—a middle-class neighborhood in New York City. Minaj’s reality in the US was much different from what she imagined as a five-year-old moving from Trinidad: “When I came from Trinidad, I thought it was gonna be so picture-perfect. I thought there was gonna be a big mansion.” In order to make ends meet in their new US American life, their four-person family moved into a studio apartment in the basement of their home while they rented the main house to another family. “We used to have to walk by and see another family living beautifully in the main house and we had to walk in the backyard and go downstairs in our basement.”¹⁰⁹ This story of economic hardship is not unlike many others embedded in the culture of hip hop. In fact, references to poverty are so common in hip hop as to be considered an essential part of the culture, a rite of passage.¹¹⁰ Minaj’s 2018 Instagram post reveals a distinctive aspect of her story that is not ubiquitous in hip hop culture: growing up in the US as an immigrant and navigating expectations of American childhood. (see Figure 10)

¹⁰⁹ “Nicki Minaj: My Time Again,” 18:13, YouTube, posted by Nicki Minaj Lyrics, February 11, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9EhCm9-Sp0>

¹¹⁰ For more on hip hop culture, see L. Kajikawa, *Sounding Race in Rap Songs* (University of California Press, 2015); Robert Con Davis, and David S. Gross. “Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and the Ethos of the Subaltern.” *Contemporary Literary Criticism Select*, (2007); J. S. Baumlin & T. F. Baumlin (Eds.), *Ethos : New Essays in Rhetorical and Critical Theory*. 1st ed. (Dallas, Tex: Southern Methodist University Press, 1994); Anthony Harrison and Craig Arthur “Hip-Hop Ethos.” *Humanities (Basel)* 8, no. 1 (2019): 1-14.

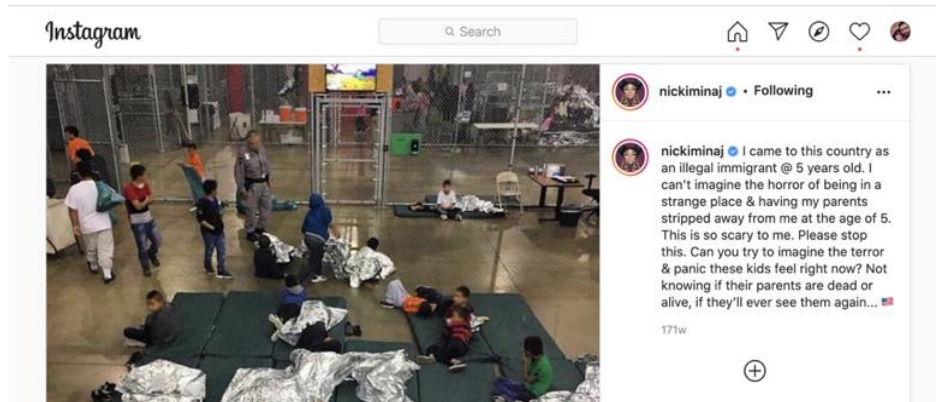


Figure 10: “I came to this country as an illegal immigrant @ 5 years old.” Minaj, 2018¹¹¹

As I sift through Minaj’s alter egos and their differing sonic identities, I detect a difference in her *alter egoing* from that of other artists. As Minaj raps about white picket fences and “bag[ing] white guy[s],” her *alter egoing* maintains an ambivalence towards American girlhood that not only destabilizes early 21st-century notions of postraciality, but sketches a disillusionment specific to women who grow up negotiating their national belonging. Through what I theorize as *ecstatic disidentification*, I argue that Minaj exploits the porous boundary of the subject/object and carves out space for Black expression within the constraints of a heterosexist, mass-mediated marketplace.

In this chapter, I approach Minaj’s *alter egoing* from W.E.B. Du Bois’s question, “What does it feel like to be a problem?”¹¹² I take Du Bois’s question and propose a theoretical framework that reads emancipatory potential in what at first appears to be only harmful stereotypes and cultural appropriation in Minaj’s *alter egoing*. I then outline significant biographical events in Minaj’s life and how they relate to notions of American girlhood and how her *alter egoing* engages

¹¹¹ A post shared by Barbie® (@nickiminaj) on Jun 20, 2018 at 11:54am PDT.

¹¹² W.E.B. Du Bois and Patricia H. Hinchey. *The Souls of Black Folk* (Gorham, Maine: Myers Education Press, 2018), 7.

with such notions. Moving to the alter egos Roman Zolanski and Chun-Li, I explore the illegibility of Black gender under white supremacist logics. I conclude the chapter by outlining the groundwork Nicki Minaj laid through her alter egos for other racialized, queer, and otherwise non-normative artists.

3.2 Nicki Minaj's Ecstatic Disidentification as Intellectual Labor

As an emcee, Minaj is a fundamentally sonic artist, but as an icon of popular culture (i.e. hip hop) her visual rhetoric is at the very least equally fundamental to her iconicity. Iconic features of Minaj's performance which are frequently scrutinized are her parodic use of accents, her costumes and hairstyles that borrow from and allude to various East Asian cultures (ox horn buns with chopsticks and Harajuku fashion), and her explicitly sexualized modes of dress. When looking at Minaj's exercise of agency through *alter egoing*, a discomfort arises that can be summarized by the question: does Minaj acquire agency through oppressive means, such as cultural appropriation, racist imagery, and regressive gender ideologies? Put another way, does her exercise of agency through *alter egoing*, come at the expense of other oppressed identities? I address this concern with the work of José E. Muñoz. Through her sonic and visual performance, Minaj generates a *disidentifying* act, what Muñoz defines as a "survival strateg[y] the minoritarian subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship."¹¹³ Minaj's *alter egoing*, which includes her arguably problematic use of accents,

¹¹³ José E. Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (U of Minnesota P, 1999), 4.

cultural signifiers, and sexualized dress renders porous the boundary between subjecthood and objectification, emancipation and oppression.

Minaj's acts of *disidentification* through *alter egoing* generate *ecstatic* possibilities. *Ecstasy*, as defined by Black feminist theorist Jennifer C. Nash, refers to "the possibilities of female pleasures within a phallic economy and to the possibilities of Black female pleasures within a white-dominated representational economy."¹¹⁴ Minaj's *ecstatic disidentification* through *alter egoing*, reveals the uncomfortable contradictions and possibilities that come from a Black woman working with and against oppressive logics. Minaj's *ecstatic disidentification*, which I argue include not just her body but, to borrow from Roland Barthes (1972), the "grain of the voice" is an act of intellectual labor that enables her to find [her] own legibility.¹¹⁵ Thus, as I theorize Minaj's alter egos as *ecstatic disidentification*, her *alter egoing* becomes a form of intellectual labor, a project that takes on objects and actions traditionally viewed as regressive and infuses them with new emancipatory meaning. As a Black woman who was raised without documentation of citizenship, Minaj's artistic output becomes a disidentifying creative process that critiques US notions of gender, sexuality, race, and national belonging.

¹¹⁴ Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined*, 2.

¹¹⁵ Mireille Miller-Young, "Hip-Hop Honeys and Da Hustlaz: Black Sexualities in the New Hip-Hop Pornography" *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* (vol. 8, no. 1, 2007, pp. 278). Also see: Shoniqua Roach, "Black Respectable Currency: Reading Black Feminism and Sexuality in Contemporary Performance." *Journal of American Culture* (Malden, Mass.) 42, no. 1 (March 2019): 10–20. Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980* 1st ed. New York: Hill and Wang, 1985.

3.3 Princess Barbie and the Assessment of American Girlhood

Minaj started gaining traction in the music industry after the rapid release of her mixtapes (*Playtime Is Over* [2007], *Sucka Free* [2008], and *Beam Me Up Scotty* [2009]). She also became known for her guest verses in such hip hop hits as “BedRock” (2009), “My Bad Chick” (2010) and later Kanye’s controversial “Monster” (2010). In 2021, *Beam Me Up Scotty* was re-released and became the highest debuting rap mixtape by a woman in the history of the *Billboard 2000*.¹¹⁶ Minaj gained recognition for her unique flow, clever wordplay, and her strikingly ultra-femme, and Harajuku-inspired fashion aesthetic.

Since her debut album (*Pink Friday* 2010), Minaj has been transgressing hood authenticity with girly artifice and fantasy. *Pink Friday* was certified triple-platinum by RIAA and described as a mix of “high-intensity pop confections, gritty rap tracks, and quasi-rock songs.”¹¹⁷ *Pink Friday: Roman Reloaded* (2012), Minaj’s second album, again subverted hip hop norms by including dance-pop tracks. In her third album, *The Pinkprint* (2014), Minaj stylistically returned to hip hop. She compares this album and her impact on the rap industry to that of Jay-Z, connecting herself through wordplay with Jay-Z’s 2001 album, *The Blueprint*. Minaj’s fourth album, *Queen* (2018), continues stylistically in the hip hop vein and has been described as a “banquet of trash talk” and full of “high-IQ pettiness.”¹¹⁸ What has remained consistent throughout every album is

¹¹⁶ “Nicki Minaj Celebrates ‘Beam Me Up Scotty’ Chart Debut”. *Rap-Up*. Retrieved May 24, 2021. <https://www.rap-up.com/2021/05/23/nicki-minaj-celebrates-beam-me-up-scotty-chart-debut/>

¹¹⁷ “American album certifications – Nicki Minaj – Pink Friday.” Recording Industry Association of America. Retrieved December 18, 2010; Eduarte, A. C. (2020, December 9). ‘Pink Friday,’ *The Soundtrack of the Decade*, *Turns Ten*. Arts | The Harvard Crimson. Retrieved September 29, 2021, from <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2020/12/9/pink-friday-nicki-minaj-retrospective-2020-article/>.

¹¹⁸ C. Jenkins, (2018, August 13) “The Banquet of Trash Talk That Is Nicki Minaj’s Queen,” *Vulture*. Retrieved September 29, 2021, from <https://www.vulture.com/2018/08/review-nicki-minajs-queen.html>; S. Kornhaber, (2018, August 16) “Nicki Minaj Guards a Shrinking Kingdom” *The Atlantic*. Retrieved September 29, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/08/nicki-minaj-queen-review/567499/>.

Minaj's *alter egoing*, her sonic, visual, and narratological evocation of alternate identities that sketch a distinct ambivalence toward American girlhood.

Minaj was born in the Saint James district of Port of Spain, Trinidad, on December 8, 1982. At the age of five, she and her brother joined their mother in Queens, New York City, where they were raised without papers of citizenship. "When you're a kid," Minaj explains to the documentary camera, "fantasy is way better than reality, when you have a drug-addicted parent [*sic*]. Since I was a kid I've always lived in fantasy."¹¹⁹ Minaj's preoccupation with fantasy and imaginative play as a child is evident throughout her musical oeuvre, in her lyrics, visual rhetoric, and narrative works.

Minaj's formative years took place during the "Disney Princess boom" of the 1990s. Thus, topically, it is not surprising that her brand of fantasy elicits princess culture; however, it is an unusual choice for a rapper.¹²⁰ It is hard to say whether the 1990s princess boom stimulated Minaj's early dependence on fantasy, but Minaj has made it known that she maintained an active imagination since before her arrival in Queens. Recall her childhood American dream of moving to the US: "When I came from Trinidad I thought it was gonna be so picture-perfect. I thought there was gonna be a big mansion."¹²¹ As noted in the quote at the beginning of this section, Minaj used fantasy to escape familial stressors and traumatic events, such as her father's substance abuse and his burning down of their family home.

With a penchant for fantasy and the need for an escape from reality, Minaj became preoccupied at a young age with the possibilities of the US, a preoccupation undoubtedly

¹¹⁹ "Nicki Minaj's Rise to Fame (Ep. 1)" 15:27, YouTube, posted by Nicki Minaj Lyrics, July 13, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=btjP2CgXQpA&t=17s>.

¹²⁰ Alexandra Heatwole, "Disney girlhood: princess generations and once upon a time" *Studies in the Humanities*, vol. 43 Issue 1-2 (Dec. 2106), Indiana University of Pennsylvania Dept. of English Pub.

¹²¹ "Nicki Minaj's Rise to Fame (Ep. 1)" 15:27, YouTube, posted by Nicki Minaj Lyrics, July 13, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=btjP2CgXQpA&t=17s>.

influenced by the popular belief in the American dream, that is, the popular notion of America as a country of upward social mobility and unobstructed meritocracy.¹²² The American dream, however, is a fraught concept for people who were brought to the US as children, especially when raised without documentation of citizenship. When first-generation immigrants grow up in the US, they are often pressured to financially provide for parents and other family members. In other words, the US ethos of unhindered upward social mobility is not so meritocratic with this additional responsibility that at times seems like an insurmountable obstacle, “a burden [that] can be felt for generations.”¹²³ Minaj anticipated her immigration experience with the belief in the US as a “picture-perfect” fairytale, a land where everyone lives in mansions, a child’s interpretation of upward social mobility.¹²⁴ Upon arriving in America at the age of five, Minaj discovered that most people were struggling to live in the middle class economic bracket. As with many immigrant children, Minaj had to adjust her expectations. The picture-perfect fairytale was further destabilized by her immediate outsider status within her local community due to her Trinidadian accent. To gain acceptance amongst her peers, she had to become a quick study of American girlhood.

What does it mean when a Black hip hop artist, who came to the US as a young girl, appropriates Disney princess-ness and claims Barbie as her alter ego? This question is what I attempt to address as I theorize Minaj’s hyper-femme *alter egoing*. Throughout her albums, Minaj visually and sonically evokes Barbie and the Disney princess in very similar ways, thus in my analysis I fuse the two, calling her ultra-femme *alter egoing* “Princess Barbie.” Barbie dolls were

¹²² "Lesson Plan: The American Dream". *Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540 USA*.

¹²³ F. Popal, (2021). *Surviving or Thriving? What it takes for immigrants to Succeed: Bush Center*. Surviving or Thriving? What It Takes for Immigrants to Succeed | Bush Center. Retrieved September 29, 2021, from <https://www.bushcenter.org/catalyst/state-of-the-american-dream/popal-what-it-takes-to-make-it-in-america.html>.

¹²⁴ “Nicki Minaj: My Time Again,” 18:13, YouTube, posted by Nicki Minaj Lyrics, February 11, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9EhCm9-Sp0>

initially solely visual signifiers with literally no voice until the 1997 song “Barbie Girl,” and then later in the *Toy Story* in 1999 and the Barbie TV shows created in the 2010s. Disney princesses have always been both visual and sonic signifiers. Following Minaj’s lead, my analysis intentionally conflates the rapper’s use of Barbie with the Disney princess as symbols of and pedagogical texts for white American girlhood.

Minaj’s ultra-femme persona was crafted as early as her mixtape days with her use of the moniker Barbie. To this day she refers to herself as Barbie in her raps (“It’s Barbie, bitch!”), her décolletage frequently showcases a diamond encrusted “Barbie” necklace and she refers to her fans as “Barbz.” Furthermore, some of Minaj’s earliest music videos allude to or directly draw from Disney Princess stories, such as Jasmine in “Your Love” and Cinderella in “Moment 4 Life”). Minaj’s ultra-femme persona utilizes traditional tools of white American girlhood fantasy. Put another way, “playing Barbie” and “playing princess” is a key feature of Minaj’s artistic output.

One of Minaj’s first and iconic references to this Barbie vocality, or what I call Princess Barbie *alter egoing*, is in the *We Are Young Money* 2009 single “Bed Rock.” Along with her pink hair, pink clothing, and “Barbie” necklace, Minaj raps with a “Barbie Girl” timbre. As mentioned earlier, the Barbie doll’s 1959 debut was a visual signifier, specifically of hegemonic, western womanhood, a pedagogical image instructing girls on acceptable femininity. More recently, Barbie has been ascribed a sonic profile with the controversial dance-pop single “Barbie Girl” (1997) by the Danish group Aqua. In the opening monologue, (“Hi Ken!” “Sure, Ken!”), and in the song itself, “Barbie” uses an ultra-feminine, pinched timbre. A less satirical sonic profile of Barbie emerged in 2013 with the TV special “Barbie: Life in the Dreamhouse,” followed by the 2018 TV show “Barbie Dreamhouse Adventures.” In both the satirical “Barbie Girl” song and the TV shows, Barbie’s vocal production is hyper-feminized through lightly supported, high-tessitura

speech and song. This vocal quality is comparable to the high-register, quasi-infantile sonic profile of traditional Disney princesses. In “Bed Rock” Minaj’s use of Princess Barbie timbre, which already inherently references white American girlhood, is embellished with vocal fry, a millennial reference to the quintessential (deviant) white girl of the era, Britney Spears.¹²⁵

The “Barbie Tingz” and “Stupid Hoe” music videos bear the sonic manifestations of Princess Barbie that include childish schoolyard taunts, verses rapped in upper-registers, and lightly supported infantile melodies.¹²⁶ These sonic manifestations, coupled with the visual, expose the confining nature of gender norms that American girls and women are expected to embody.

3.4 Princess Barbie and Transgressive Doll Play

The bridge of the “Stupid Hoe” music video (minute 3:34) is an example of Princess Barbie. Minaj’s vocality shifts away from traditional rap timbre, and instead mimics schoolyard taunts (“Stupid hoes is my enemy/Stupid hoes is so wack”) and off-key diva melismas. In the music video, Princess Barbie stands on a giant chair. Her strappy shoes are off, her feet wrapped in lacy church socks peeking below her dusty pink dress, a lollipop in her hand. (see Figure 11) Barbie’s eyes are synthetically modified to be unrealistically large, the apples of her cheeks dotted with infantilizing freckles; her face is accented with banana yellow lips, framed with a wig of straight bubble gum pink locks. These doll-like modifications and girlhood references, taken

¹²⁵ Amanda L. Chan, “Vocal Fry and Young Women: Are They Trying to Sound Like Ke\$ha And Britney?” *Huffington Post*, December 15, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/12/15/vocal-fry-raspy-voice-speech-trend-patternyoung-women_n_1151293.html; *Voicing Girlhood in Popular Music: Performance, Authority, Authenticity*, edited by Jacqueline Warwick, and Allison Adrian, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016.

¹²⁶ “Stupid Hoe” was written by Minaj and DJ Diamond Kuts. It was the second single released from her second studio album, *Pink Friday: Roman Reloaded* (2012), released by Cash Money Records. “Barbie Tingz” was released in 2018 as a single. It was written by Minaj, produced by Chevy Music and released by Young Money Entertainment and Cash Money Records. It was a bonus track of Minaj’s fourth studio album *Queen*.

together with the sonic profile of Princess Barbie, outline excessive femininity, rendering Minaj a deviant figure of failed gender performance.



Figure 11: Princess Barbie in “Stupid Hoe” singing a mocking child-like melody in the bridge.

After two measures of the schoolyard taunt, Princess Barbie sings a melismatic melody, complete with emotive hand gestures comically articulating every pitch. This moment is an obvious parody of hip hop divas, perhaps specifically of Mariah Carey, who has maintained a very public beef with Minaj. Princess Barbie’s “diva moment” intentionally lacks the requisite series of overtones, emphasized by the sidebar, “And I ain’t hit that note,” a failed performance of femininity.

The music video then cuts to the modified version of Princess Barbie. Again, Minaj, through Princess Barbie, overperforms American girlhood's expectations of gender performance. Through excessive gender performance (the “diva moment”) and the noted failure of it (“And I ain’t hit that note”) Minaj quite literally outlines the absurd, constructed nature of all-American femininity and her inability to fit the all-American mold. (see Figure 12 and 13)



Figure 12: “Stupid Hoe” screenshot, Minaj parodying hip hop divas. (right)



Figure 13: “Stupid Hoe” screenshot, Minaj modified to look like Barbie.

The second verse in “Barbie Tingz” evokes Princess Barbie with a child-like taunt similar to that in “Stupid Hoe” (“Rap bitches tell they team/‘Make ‘em like Barbie’/Had to come off IG so they can’t stalk me/All they do is copy looks, steal music too”).¹²⁷ In the pre-chorus melody, the Princess Barbie-ness is emphasized with heavy vocal fry, Minaj dressed in a delicately feminine blush chiffon dress, with a large satin bow atop her head.

Perhaps the most interesting commentary on American girlhood in “Barbie Tingz” starts at minute 1:34 of the music video. Minaj suddenly appears in a stiff plastic costume in solid neon colors, with stilted choreography like the restrained mobility of a plastic Barbie doll with articulated joints. (see Figure 14 and 15) This costuming is similar to, and may indeed be inspired

¹²⁷ In this verse Minaj accuses other rappers (perhaps Lil’ Kim) of copying her looks and music.

by, Oskar Schlemmer's *Triadisches Ballett* (1922). Schlemmer's 1920s avant-garde ballet used bulky, geometrical costumes to render the dancers' bodies as shapes. "Barbie Tingz" dabbles in Schlemmer's dialectic stage theory, contrasting the natural human body with the mechanical rendering of the body through costume prosthetics.¹²⁸ In this scene where Minaj's Barbie is dressed in a bulky, plastic, geometric costume, she—like the ballet dancers in *Triadisches Ballett*—resembles a puppet, a toy, a doll.



Figure 14: Barbie “Barbie Tings” wearing a geometric costume similar to that worn in Schlemmer’s *Triadisches Ballett*.

¹²⁸ Carrie J. Preston, “Modernism’s Dancing Marionettes: Oskar Schlemmer, Michel Fokine, and Ito Michio.” *Modernist Cultures* 9, no. 1 (2014): 115–133.



Figure 15: Schlemmer's *Triadisches Ballett*. The film was produced by Bavaria Atelier GmbH, and it was released under the slightly revised title "Das triadische Ballett."¹²⁹

When Princess Barbie appears in her rigid costume, she repeats the beginning intro twice: "I'm a bad bitch/fuck the bitch/bitch get slick/I'll cut the bitch/I'm a bad bitch/Suck some dick/If that bitch get slick/I'll cut the bitch." She toggles on a perfect fourth, coupled with a mocking timbre tinged with vocal fry. On the last line, the second time she repeats the lyrics listed above, her melody moves away from the mocking melody and evolves into a more traditional lower tessitura rap. The sonic evolution is met with a costume change into streetwear and typical hip hop dancing. The Schlemmerian-inspired costume appears one more time in the music video, but this time while Princess Barbie raps, as opposed to the toggling fourth interval melody described above. This rapping section becomes an amalgamation between the spitting Minaj in streetwear and the stilted Princess Barbie melody. In this section she raps, but with a timbre borrowed from the previous section in which she donned the plastic dress.

¹²⁹ The film was produced by Bavaria Atelier and it was released under the slightly revised title "Das Triadische Ballett."

When a Black woman who moved to the US as a child and grew up undocumented employs Disney Princess aesthetics and adopts Barbie as her alter ego, what were once rigid icons of white all-American femininity, suddenly become malleable texts by which to critique ideas of race and gender embedded in American girlhood, and even the American dream ideology. Minaj visually and sonically manipulates Disney princess and Barbie culture's symbolic purpose of teaching US-based ideologies of how 'to be female,' and creates her own version of "playing princess" and "Barbie play" through Princess Barbie *alter egoing*.

The album cover art of *Pink Friday*, both parodies American ideals of femininity—Minaj sits with artificially elongated legs, lightened skin and overly wide eyes— it also takes part in the subversive act that Miriam Formanek-Brunell calls "transgressive doll play."¹³⁰ With no visible arms, Minaj sits in the photo as a dismembered Princess Barbie, her arms torn from her body, alluding to the not uncommon activity of girls who abuse dolls "in order to resist adult-mandated leisure activity."¹³¹ (see Figure 16)

130 Miriam Forman-Brunell, *Made to Play House : Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood, 1830-1930*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.

131 Nicki Minaj, *Pink Friday*. Motown, B0042RUMEQ. 2010. Miriam Formanek-Brunell (1993).



Figure 16: *Pink Friday* album cover.

“Barbie Tingz” and “Stupid Hoe” are punctuated with robotic or plastic-presenting dance and gesture, both commenting on stereotypical signifiers of American girlhood. In the beginning of “Stupid Hoe” the music video is a silhouette of girls playing double-dutch, a traditional signifier of Black American girlhood and a foundation of hip hop.¹³² Minaj can be seen hanging her Barbie necklace outside of a car window. Shortly after, the nude midsection of a plastic female figurine occupies the shot, a Barbie doll modified to reflect the body shape of Minaj (butt, thighs and breasts more voluptuous than the typical Barbie doll). In this song Minaj chooses to embody an artificial, plastic-like ultra-femininity. Princess Barbie parodies the standards of white femininity that is required for full membership in American girlhood and exposes the impossible standards of such a femininity for all women, but especially for women of color.

¹³² Kyra Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 137.

Princess Barbie also underlines the historical use of Black women's bodies as "a plastic, disposable, trafficked, fungible, commodity object."¹³³ Minaj's queer femme-of-center *alter egoing* is a response to the surveillance of women who are unable to fully fit the American ideal of white girlhood.¹³⁴ In my view, Minaj co-ops commercial icons of American femininity, in this case Disney Princesses and Barbie, and performs a kind of queer Black femme disturbance through the intensification of stereotypes, which confronts the unique challenges presented to women of color in the context of American girlhood. In taking on stereotypical sonic signifiers of Princess Barbie and manipulating them into parody, Minaj "makes Barbie her bitch [...]" and sublimates the supremacy of Barbie as white, thin, and blonde, to her own articulation of Minaj.¹³⁵ This kind of *alter egoing* uses a long-time antifeminist symbol to impart cultural knowledge by pushing back against the regime of white beauty."

Minaj's *alter egoing* generates important contemporary cultural knowledge, as P.H. Collins contends that, "Within African American communities, Black women fashioned an independent standpoint about the meaning of Black womanhood. These self-definitions enabled Black women to use African-derived conceptions of self and community to resist negative evaluations of Black womanhood advanced by dominant groups."¹³⁶ Barbie and princess culture paradoxically maintain a rigid model of American womanhood, while simultaneously bearing "a certain blankness that enables interpretive versatility."¹³⁷ Through Princess Barbie, Minaj coopts

¹³³ Seth Cosimini, "'I'm a Motherfuckin' Monster!': Play, Perversity, and Performance of Nicki Minaj." *Feminist formations* 29, no. 2 (2017): 55.

¹³⁴ C. Riley Snorton (2014) On the Question of "Who's Out in Hip Hop", *Souls*, 16:3-4, 286.

¹³⁵ Aria S. Halliday, "Fashioning Black Barbies, Princesses, and Sexual Expression for Black Girls: The Multivisuality of Nicki Minaj". ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2017), 78.

¹³⁶ P. H. Collins, (1991). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment: Perspectives on Gender* (New York, NY: Routledge), 11.

¹³⁷ Aria S. Halliday, "Fashioning Black Barbies, Princesses, and Sexual Expression for Black Girls: The Multivisuality of Nicki Minaj". ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2017), 149.

princess culture imagination and Barbie play and produces acts of *ecstatic disidentification*, giving fans another strategy for destabilizing American girlhood.

3.5 Roman Zolanski 's Queer Catharsis

Minaj: "Roman is a crazy boy who lives in me, he says things that I don't wanna say."

Interviewer: "It must be nice to have an ignorant, loudmouth that you can blame."

Minaj: "He's here for a reason. People conjured him up. Now he won't leave."¹³⁸

In this soft-spoken interview about the recording of "Roman's Revenge," Minaj talks of the birth of Roman Zolanski, a loud and violent alter ego, "born out of rage," that lives inside of her.¹³⁹ Minaj's *alter egoing* through Roman is different from Monáe's android alter ego. As I argued in the previous chapter, Monáe relates to Cindi Mayweather as a version of herself and also as a theoretical construct representing all who are marginalized. Rather than a theoretical construction of herself, Minaj speaks of Roman, her self-professed favorite alter ego, as though he is an alternate spirit or personality, a violent, "crazy boy" that resides in her that she cannot control.

Although some fans theorize that Roman first appeared in Ludacris's "My Bad Chick" (2010) and the aforementioned "Monster" music videos, the first example of overt *alter egoing* through Roman is when Minaj asks her fairy godmother about him in "Moment 4 Life."¹⁴⁰ In this music video Roman is folded into a narrative, complete with interactive characters (Martha Zolanski and Slim Shady) and backstories (Roman's mother, aka the fairy godmother, talks of

¹³⁸ "Nicki Minaj Recording Roman's Revenge," *Onikamonster*, 3:31, YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I81a3SahOmc>.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Fans argue that Minaj becomes Roman whenever she performs with the aura of controlled anger, with particularly violent lyrics, and aggressive expressions and lyrics (i.e. barred teeth, Freddie Krueger hands).

sending Roman and Slim Shady/Eminem away to boarding school for “wreaking havoc over the industry”). The story of Roman revolves around a conflict of identity, inflamed by his mother’s attempted erasure of his non-heteronormativity and neurodivergence.¹⁴¹

Roman is Minaj’s most fleshed out alter ego, and as such more transparently demonstrates *alter egoing*. Roman first formally materialized in *Pink Friday* (2010), and then in *Pink Friday: Roman Reloaded* (2012). However, Roman’s most striking appearance took place during Minaj’s 2012 Grammy performance.”¹⁴² The 2012 performance showcased the song “Roman Holiday.” It was choreographed by Laurieann Gibson and directed by Hype Williams. The end product resulted in a cross between a Broadway show and *The Exorcist*.¹⁴³

The lyrics of the song tell the story of attempted conversion therapy and exorcism prompted by Roman’s mother and carried out by a priest. The narrative is made most obvious by the hook sung by Roman’s mother, “Take your medication, Roman/Take a short vacation, Roman/You’ll be okay.” The performance starts with Minaj as Roman. Roman, who Minaj describes as a gay white man from London, is not evoked through gender-swapping costume or racial masquerading. Far from it, Minaj is in hyperfemme Barbie attire. Instead, the *alter egoing* is signaled sonically, as well as through an attitudinal shift. Minaj grimaces with bared teeth; her voice switches to a deeper tessitura, articulated with vocal cracks.

The stage debut of Roman at the 2012 Grammys was not well received by critics. Before identifying how Minaj employs *ecstatic disidentification* through Roman, I will summarize this

¹⁴¹ Martha’s adherence to normativity pushes her to control Roman by means of religion and medication.

¹⁴² On February 14, 2014, Minaj pronounced Roman dead, but five months later she said he would return. Caitlin Carter (2014, December 22). *Nicki Minaj might leak song featuring entire verse from alter-ego Roman Zolanski [watch]*. Music Times. Retrieved March 8, 2022, from <https://www.musictimes.com/articles/20978/20141219/nicki-minaj-leak-new-song-verse-alter-ego-roman-zolanski-the-pinkprint-real-watch.htm>.

¹⁴³ *The Exorcist* is a 1973 American supernatural horror film directed by William Friedkin, produced and written by William Peter Blatty, based on Blatty’s 1971 best selling novel of the same name. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/01/arts/music/nicki-minaj-is-the-influential-leader-of-hip-hop.html>

largely negative reception. This summary is important because I believe the non-specificity of the critique betrays an unspoken discomfort—an inconvenient “truth,” if you will—that not all queer embodiments are treated equally, even in the presumed “liberal,” mass-mediation entertainment industry of the United States.

Minaj’s Grammy performance was considered by many critics a career-plummeting flop. Some of the critiques leveled at Minaj included the assessment that the performance was overwrought, uncritically offensive, poorly performed, and simply the wrong genre for the rapper. “Nicki Minaj gotta get back to rap, she Lady Gaga’ing too much” reads one disapproving comment on the social media network Twitter.¹⁴⁴ “[Minaj] tried too hard to be a tweetable moment,” *The Washington Post* author, Allison Stewart writes of the performance. Ken Ehrlich, the producer of the Grammys Award show, called it controversial without being “good.”¹⁴⁵ Apparently unaware of Minaj’s use of themes from other religions, such as Islam, the president of the Catholic League, Bill Donohue, accused Minaj of inconsistency, claiming that such poor representation of other groups and religions (e.g. Judaism, Islam, LGBTQ+ communities), would never have been tolerated.¹⁴⁶ Some critics simply assessed the Grammy performance as badly executed and the

¹⁴⁴ A. Stewart, (2012, February 13). *Grammys 2012: The Last Exorcism of Nicki Minaj: What Went Wrong (And What Almost Went Right)*. *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/click-track/post/grammys-2012-the-last-exorcism-of-nicki-minaj-what-went-wrong-and-what-almost-went-right/2012/02/13/gIQAzAxMBR_blog.html

¹⁴⁵ A. Thompson, (2015, January 29). *Grammy Producer: Nicki Minaj's 2012 Performance was a 'Disappointment'*. USA Today. Retrieved September 29, 2021, from <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/entertainthis/2015/01/29/grammy-producer-nicki-minajs-2012-performance-was-a-disappointment/77601672/>.

¹⁴⁶ J. Chen, (2019, January 10). *2012 Grammys Performance by Nicki Minaj Wasn't Meant to be Controversial, Says Singer: 'I have to stay true to what I'm doing.'* nydailynews.com. Retrieved September 29, 2021, from <https://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/music-arts/nicki-minaj-defends-controversial-grammys-performance-stay-true-article-1.1022328>

song poorly written.¹⁴⁷ As I hope will be made clear through the lens of *alter egoing*, these critiques are undergirded by hetero-racist ideologies.

On the Grammy stage, Roman is first seen at a confessional with a priest listening on the other side of the confessional screen. Roman starts the song with an excerpt from “Roman’s Revenge” (“I am not Jasmine, I am Aladdin/I’m startin’ to feel like a dungeon dragon”) and abruptly sings an excerpt from the Broadway musical *West Side Story* (“I Feel Pretty”). Roman substitutes the lyrics “and gay” with “I slay.” He bends the melody, adds an uncontrolled vibrato and the listening priest covers his ears in protest. (see Figure 17)



Figure 17: Nicki Minaj as Roman in “Roman Holiday” confession to a priest at the 2012 Grammy Performance.

The live performance cuts to a recorded video. A title card enters the overhead screen and reads: “The Exorcism of Roman.” A white British woman (Martha Zolanski) opens her front door

¹⁴⁷ J. L. Preyss, (2012, February 17). *Revelations: Nicki MINAJ Grammy Performance Went Too Far*. The Victoria Advocate. Retrieved September 29, 2021, from https://www.victoriaadvocate.com/361mag/entertainment/revelations-nicki-minaj-grammy-performance-went-too-far/article_cde120b7-7575-58cd-b9a5-94d76b8a58e5.html.

to a priest. Obviously distressed, she informs him that Roman is “not well.” The scene is aesthetically set up as a horror film, with disjunct pizzicato and tremolo strings, and gray tone filter. The priest approaches the disheveled Roman who is singing “I feel pretty” to himself. Upon seeing the priest, Roman hisses and crawls up the wall, an obvious signal of Roman’s demon possession. “What is your name?” the priest asks. “Roman!” He screams.

The recorded video stops, and we are brought back to the live stage, which resembles a metal concert, with dark costuming, gothic architecture, and choreographed smoke and flame. The stage is set to look like a catholic church. The back of the stage is lined with floor to ceiling digital stained-glass windows. Robed dancers swing thuribles, adding to the catholic allusion. The disembodied voice of Martha, now the recorded voice of Minaj, starts to sing the hook, the words of rebuke to Roman sung with an exaggerated British accent. Columns line the stage, with a raised platform in the middle where Roman is strapped to an upright slab. Roman breaks free as the stained-glass windows shatter: “Leave me alone, mother.” Amid the chaos of dancing priests, kneeling altar boys, and women clothed in leather straps, a chorus in hooded robes sing a hymn, “O, Come All Ye Faithful.” The priest from the confessional enters the stage, now dressed in priestly robes, and is followed by altar boys.¹⁴⁸ The priest performs an exorcism and Roman’s reclined body is lifted into the air by cables, giving the appearance of having no assistance, save the incantations of the priest. Minaj called the Grammy performance Roman’s coming out party, based on a movie that she was in the process of writing.¹⁴⁹ Minaj recites her vision of the story behind the performance:

¹⁴⁸ J. Vena, (2012, February 13). *Nicki Minaj Calls Grammy Performance ROMAN'S 'Coming-Out Party'*. MTV News. Retrieved September 29, 2021, from <http://www.mtv.com/news/1679164/nicki-minaj-grammys-2012-performance/>.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

“I had this vision for Roman. I had this vision for him to be sort of exorcized. [...] People around tell him he’s not good enough because he’s not normal. So, his mother is scared and the people around him are afraid.”¹⁵⁰

The illegibility of Minaj’s *ecstatic disidentification* is especially acute through Roman. Roman’s identity is ambiguous, and the specifics of his struggle are opaque. Minaj has previously called Roman simply a name change, but she has also described Roman as her twin sister. She has described him as a gay man from London. Who and what is Roman? Is he a gay boy? Is Roman a Barbie? Is Roman a full-bodied Black woman? The ambiguity confuses people. Is this story of exorcism, a practice rooted in Catholicism, acting as a metaphor for conversion therapy? Or is it literally inspired by Catholicism’s checkered history with non-normative sexualities? The unclear nature of Minaj’s critique is muddled further by Roman’s embodiment: gay boy inside of a Black woman who roars “like a dungeon dragon,” that may also be suffering from mental illness. Additionally, Minaj’s genre-bending introduction of Roman that drew heavily on musical theater added to the frenetic nature of her Grammy performance.

Antagonists have taken on all shapes and forms in narrative-driven works, from femme fatales to evil Russian scientists, to bigoted Baby Boomers. Roman’s mother is a practicing Catholic who believes her son’s non-normative sexuality is a sign of demon-possession. Thus, the trauma of a Catholic exorcism becomes the central theme of Roman’s narrative, and the priest becomes the primary antagonist. The use of Christianity and its symbology is not an unusual tactic for unpacking social, cultural, and political issues on the musical stage (e.g. *Jesus Christ Superstar*, 1971; *The Book of Mormon*, 2011).¹⁵¹ Why is Minaj’s performance different from any other narrative-driven staged musical work that uses religious themes and larger-than-life choreography,

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Lady Gaga has many more songs that use religious themes: “Black Jesus,” “Bloody Mary,” “Disco Heaven,” “Electric Chapel,” “Marry the Night,” “Paparazzi,” and her latest “Venus”.

such as the likes put on by Madonna (“Like A Prayer”) and Lady Gaga (“Alejandro,” “Judas”)? These counterexamples of provocative performances— *Jesus Christ Superstar*, *The Book of Mormon*, Madonna and Lady Gaga—highlight the imbalance of artistic freedom between white artists and Black female artists when they critique symbols of western institutions (Catholicism, Christianity, American religions).

The trauma narrative of a gay white boy from London embodied by a Trinidadian-born Black woman from Queens, is a meta-narrative of gender control for women of color, specifically the illegibility of Black gender and the consequent punishment for such illegibility. Roman’s frenetic interrogation of gender control was promptly praised by high-profile members of the queer community. Just following the 2012 performance Neil Patrick Harris declared his love for the Grammy performance.¹⁵² The New York-based magazine, *The Fader*, noted how the footage from Minaj’s 2012 Grammy performance had very little presence on the internet, as though intentionally scrubbed from cultural memory. “But here’s the thing,” reveals author Salvatore Maicki, “gay Twitter *never* forgets. [...] Something about the song’s manic energy feels much more suited to the hellscape of 2019 than it must have in 2012.”¹⁵³

Through *alter egoing*, Minaj breaks gender, a system dependent on “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.”¹⁵⁴ Roman, like Barbie, exposes the unnatural, confining nature of gender and how it is uncomfortably aligned with sexuality and race.

¹⁵² Trent Fitzgerald, (2012, February 13). *Nicki Minaj Defends Weird 2012 Grammy Performance*. PopCrush. Retrieved March 8, 2022, from

https://popcrush.com/nicki-minaj-defends-2012-grammy-performance/?utm_source=tsmclip&utm_medium=referral

¹⁵³ Salvatore Maicki, S. (2019, June 12) “The Glorious, Haywire Resurrection of Nicki Minaj’s “Roman Holiday” in *The FADER*. <https://www.thefader.com/2019/05/17/nicki-minaj-roman-holiday-meme-grammy-performance>.

¹⁵⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2011): 45.

Roman takes the critique even further than Barbie, with his interrogation of sexuality. Minaj narratively masquerades as a gay boy, while simultaneously presenting as the typically femme and female Nicki Minaj. Roman “functions as a sort of ‘bait and switch’ on the laws of normativity,” at one time appearing to perform straight and at another time queer, but in actuality refusing either designation.¹⁵⁵ Roman illustrates how Black women are penalized for their illegibility in a white supremacist patriarchal system. Or, to add to C. Riley Snorton’s argument of “the ungendering of Blackness, post-antebellum era black people are an unstable identity in categories other than race.”¹⁵⁶ Roman exposes the constructedness of gender, plays with the pleasures and punishments of sexuality and race with multi-directional identification.

3.6 Chun-Li as Emerging Alter Ego

Minaj calls herself Chun-Li in three different songs. In her guest verse on “Fireball” (2011), Chun-Li is used as a metaphor for her ability to defend herself and others (“I’m a street fighter/Call me Chun-Li,” “Put you under my wing/I’m the top boss”). In both Ariana Grande’s song “The Light Is Coming” (2018) and Minaj’s own lead single “Chun-Li” (2018), Chun-Li becomes a rebuff to mis-accusations of villainy (“Now I’m the bad guy, call me Chun-Li,” “They need rappers like me/So they can get on their fucking keyboards/And make me the bad guy, Chun-Li”).

In isolation, Minaj’s first mention of Chun-Li does not seem to be an official or even intentional introduction of a new alter ego. When she calls herself Chun-Li in “Fireball” she

¹⁵⁵ Savannah Shange, “A King Named Nicki: Strategic Queerness and the Black Femmecee.” *Women & Performance* 24, no. 1 (2014): 30.

¹⁵⁶ C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides : a Racial History of Trans Identity* Minneapolis (University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

appears as the deviantly hyper-femme Princess Barbie. She's wearing a hyper-cutesy Harajuku costume with large furry rainbow boots, accessorized with a bubblegum pink wig and matching lipstick. Her gestures are rigidly doll-like and her eyes unnaturally wide. Despite these visual signifiers of Princess Barbie, I will argue that through Minaj's invocation of Chun-Li, a new form of *alter egoing* begins to emerge. The absence of Princess Barbie's sonic profile, Minaj's continued use of Chun-Li as a contextualizing metaphor in consequent songs, and her creation of a song titled "Chun-Li," compel me to place the street fighter into my *alter egoing* archive. Through the *alter egoing* heuristic, I understand Minaj's use of Chun-Li as a narrative symbol to express the specific hurdles and limitations of non-white women "who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship."¹⁵⁷

3.6.1 Hip Hop and Orientalism

The racial pairing of a Black woman taking on an avatar of an East Asian woman may at first seem strange, however, hip hop has a long history of using East Asian stereotypes, visually and lyrically. Such stereotypes include using yellowface to disguise as an Asian person (Mary J. Blige, Truth Hurts, TLC), performing in the wardrobe of Japanese geishas or Samurai warriors (e.g. Minaj, Mya, Monica, RES, R. Kelly), and generally sexualizing women of Asian descent (e.g. Jay Z, Busta Rhymes).¹⁵⁸

Cultural critic Edward Said calls the practice of non-Asian people using stereotypes of Asian peoples or places *Orientalism*, that is, the projection of white European ideologies onto

¹⁵⁷ José E. Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (U of Minnesota P, 1999), 4.

¹⁵⁸ For more on hip hop and Asian stereotypes, see Deborah Elizabeth Whaley, "Black Bodies/Yellow Masks: The Orientalist Aesthetic in HipHop and Black Visual Culture," in *Afro-Asian Encounters: Culture, History, Politics*, edited by Heike Raphael-Hernandez, Shannon Steen (New York: New York University Press 2006).

people of Middle Eastern and Asian descent.¹⁵⁹ He argues that this projection enforces a binary of the constructed geographies of the “West” (as civilized and democratic) and the “East” (as uncivilized, exotic, and authoritarian). Furthermore, Said theorizes how Orientalism is used to rationalize the marginalization of people of “the Orient.”¹⁶⁰ The argument that Minaj participates in Orientalism is most convincing in her appropriation and amalgamation of East Asian visual signifiers and stereotypes, namely, her use of geisha and samurai costuming (“Your Love” [2010] “5 Star” [2017]) and her performances of “Chun-Li.” In *Teen Vogue*, David Yi writes, “It’s been nothing short of disheartening to see Nicki continue to present a reductive version of Japanese culture.”¹⁶¹

The Orientalism critique leveled at Minaj was reinforced after the emergence of the #ChunLiChallenge on Instagram following the music video release of “Chun-Li.” This challenge called for fans of the music video to upload selfies and videos in which they put chopsticks in their hair and Chun-Li’s iconic oxhorn buns and lip-sync verses from the song. According to *Teen Vogue*: “The #ChunLiChallenge only further highlights how easy it is to flatten an identity to certain stereotypes or cultural markers. In this case, it allows mistreatment of Asian cultures to flourish.”¹⁶² Others have compared Minaj’s use of pan-Asian iconography to that used by such white pop stars as Gwen Stefani and Katy Perry.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

¹⁶⁰ Melani McAlister, “Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1978).” In *A Companion to Post-1945 America* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006): 550–556.

¹⁶¹ David Yi, (2018, April 27) “Nicki Minaj’s Chun Li isn’t an excuse to perpetuate Asian stereotypes” *Teen Vogue*. Retrieved March 8, 2022, from <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/chun-li-challenge-asian-stereotypes>

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ira Madison III. (2018, May 6). *Nicki Minaj’s Insulting Asian fetish In ‘CHUN LI’*. The Daily Beast. Retrieved September 29, 2021, from <https://www.thedailybeast.com/nicki-minajs-insulting-asian-fetish-in-chun-li>. It should also be noted that Minaj was active in raising and donating money to aid Japanese victims of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami.

The Orientalism label is complicated by Minaj's reliance on Afrofuturist aesthetics. In the words of Morley and Robins:

“If the future is technological, and if technology has become ‘Japanised’, then the syllogism would suggest that the future is now Japanese too. . . . Japan is the future, and it is a future that seems to be transcending and displacing Western modernity. In so far as the nation’s sense of identity has become confused with its technological capability, these developments have, of course, had profoundly disturbing and destabilizing consequences in Europe and in the United States.”¹⁶⁴

The “Chun-Li” music video, like many other Afrofuturist works borrows from East Asian (usually Japanese) popular culture in order to generate a high-tech, futuristic aesthetic.¹⁶⁵ With Afrofuturism used as an aesthetic strategy explicitly for combating anti-Blackness, the idea that this emancipatory strategy simultaneously leans on racist constructions of “the Orient” creates many shades of grey between white supremacist ideology and post-racial liberation.¹⁶⁶ Rather than focusing on every instance in which Minaj misuses an Asian stereotype, my theorization of *alter egoing* considers the moments in her music when Chun-Li is thematically evoked.

Chun-Li *alter egoing* poses a “representational dilemma replete with contradictory racial, ethnic, and national signifiers but also opens up questions about the multiple meanings” that emerge when a Black American performs an East Asian stereotype.”¹⁶⁷ My inquiries into Chun-Li *alter egoing* are guided by the work of African American studies scholar Deborah Elizabeth Whaley, when she asks: what can we learn about Black subjects when they “obscure their Black

¹⁶⁴ David Morley and Kevin. Robins. *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries* (London : Routledge, 1995) 168–9.

¹⁶⁵ Ken McLeod, “Afro-Samurai: Techno-Orientalism and Contemporary Hip Hop.” *Popular Music* 32, no. 2 (2013): 259.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Deborah Elizabeth Whaley, “Black Bodies/Yellow Masks: The Orientalist Aesthetic in HipHop and Black Visual Culture,” in *Afro-Asian Encounters: Culture, History, Politics*, edited by Heike Raphael-Hernandez, Shannon Steen (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 190.

skin with yellow masks?”¹⁶⁸ Rather than challenging the criticisms of Minaj’s participation in Orientalism, I explore the agential potential of Chun-Li *alter egoing* for Minaj.

3.6.2 Contextualizing Childhood with “Chun-Li”

In the “Chun-Li” music video, the video game character is only directly appropriated (aside from use of the name in the lyrics) through a puffed-sleeve qipao, spiked wrist cuffs, oxhorn buns and a scene in which Minaj kicks her way past her enemies. (see Figure 18 and 19) The lyrics in “Chun-Li” do not belabor the story of the street fighter character, neither is the character used to create some kind of Afro-Asian coalition (what Deborah Whaley would call *Afro-Orientalism*). Instead, the name is used as a kind of thematic, tonal center. Minaj appropriates Chun-Li, aligns her with other women of pop culture—*X-Men*’s Storm and *Tomb Raider*’s Lara Croft—and conjures a point of context, a landscape or elaborate vocabulary of childhood texts from the late 1980s and 1990s, which I argue is significant as Minaj’s ongoing negotiation of American childhood, specifically girlhood, is influenced by her move to the US in the late 1980s.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.



Figure 18: Nicki Minaj as Chun-Li in “Chun-Li,” with oxhorn buns and Street Fighter outfit.



Figure 19: Illustration of Chun-Li, with iconic oxhorn buns, high neck and puffy sleeve outfit.

Minaj has a practice of appropriating American icons of girlhood, but depending on the context that historically accompanies the icon (the Disney Princess’s fairy tale, Barbie and her numerous accessories), her appropriation can signify vastly different ideological concerns. Consider the previous section in which I discuss Disney Princesses and Barbie as pedagogical

tools for parents who want to instruct girls on appropriate all-American (read: white, cis-heteronormative) girlhood. The Barbie doll, for example, was created by a woman (Ruth Handler) for girls as an instructive model of American womanhood.¹⁶⁹ With each version of Barbie, girls were (and are) given various examples of acceptable American womanhood.

The female icons Minaj elicits in “Chun-Li”—Storm, Lara Croft, Chun-Li—are unlike Disney Princesses and Barbies, in that they are video game and comic book characters not (primarily) created for the consumption of women or girls. Rather than models of appropriate womanhood, these video game and comic book women are virtual fantasy props created by men, to be manipulated almost exclusively by men and boys with the power of the gaming controller. Minaj’s other alter egos, Barbie and the Disney Princess (aka Princess Barbie) have their problematic aspects that negatively impact notions of American girlhood, but the Chun-Li alter ego engages in a different set of problems. And, in true Minaj style, she works within and against problematic stereotypes, taking part in the problem while simultaneously critiquing it. This act of *ecstatic disidentification* revels in irony.

A considerable part of that irony is that Chun-Li is the bad guy, not in her own story, but in the stories of others. In the *Street Fighter* video game, Chun-Li is an undercover Interpol agent seeking to avenge the death of her father. Even though the Chun-Li character is a “good guy,” parents who observe their children playing *Street Fighter* may instead see the sexy non-white character as a “bad guy.” What they may see when their child, usually a son, plays Chun-Li on *Street Fighter* is that they are playing with (or “worse,” taking on the avatar of) a sexualized non-white female character. Chun-Li, as a pedagogical tool for children, thus becomes a threat to American notions of normative gender and sexuality.

¹⁶⁹ For more on the history of the Barbie Doll and its roll in American society, see Tanya Lee Stone, *The Good, the Bad, and the Barbie : a Doll’s History and Her Impact on Us*. New York: Viking, 2010.

Minaj's *alter egoing* doesn't rework a problematic stereotype (exoticized, non-white woman) or create some kind of bridge between different marginalized non-white women. Chun-Li is a metaphor for Minaj's own struggles with how others misinterpret her. Chun-Li *alter egoing* is Minaj's attempt to make legible the struggle of working in a mass-mediated marketplace that habitually relegates complicated women to the role of "bad guy."

3.6.3 Misrepresenting Miss King Kong

Chun-Li *alter egoing* exposes the strictures of misrepresentation and stereotypes with another character of popular culture: King Kong. In the second verse, Minaj wears a "beast" necklace, writhes on the floor and raps, "Now I'm about to turn around and beat my chest/This is King Kong? Yes, Miss King Kong." In this short scene we are offered what appears to be the epitome of uncontrolledness, a woman writhing on the floor. The uncontrollable unpredictability of a Roman Zolanski-like, "Monster" moment, which this scene seems to feature, parallels key themes of the King Kong story where American explorers invade Skull Island (King Kong's home) in order to catch and remove the dangerously unpredictable "monster."¹⁷⁰ In the story of King Kong, the "monster" is first considered a threat, but by the end of the film is understood as a protector of the weak.

In her *alter egoing*, Minaj constructs a counter-history. By invoking King Kong, Minaj subsumes its cultural lore, which is intertwined with the story of Godzilla, a creature of destruction empowered by nuclear radiation.¹⁷¹ Godzilla has been conceived of as a metaphor for nuclear

¹⁷⁰ M. McKee, 2015. *Godzilla (1954)*. [online] IMDb. Available at: <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0047034/>> [Accessed 1 December 2015].

¹⁷¹ Morris Low, "The birth of Godzilla: Nuclear fear and the ideology of Japan as victim." *Japanese Studies* 13, no. 2 (1993): 48-58.

weapons, and more specifically western, American imperialism in East Asia, specifically Japan.¹⁷² King Kong and Godzilla engage in battle, King Kong as the protector of humanity, Godzilla as the destroyer of it. Through the *alter egoing* heuristic, Minaj's invocation of King Kong becomes a multilayered metaphor. Like King Kong's battle with Godzilla (a.k.a western imperialism), Minaj pushes against American notions of acceptable girlhood. When Minaj raps, "Yes, it's King Kong," but "they paintin' me out to be the bad guy" she highlights the experience of being inaccurately labelled and wrongly understood as a threatening, rampaging beast or an insidious femme fatale, when in fact Minaj is a fighter for justice (Chun-Li), a protector of the weak (King Kong).

When interviewed by the digital media company Genius, Minaj explains her relationship to Chun-Li, "The point is that even when you're fighting for a good cause, people can flip it. I think that I am the good guy, being portrayed as the bad guy."¹⁷³ The convoluted meta-narrative of her lyrics—a good guy, who is called a bad guy, who is stereotyped as a model minority, who is actually a Black woman—conveys *ecstatic disidentification* as a postmodern referential system that undermines American scripts of womanhood and race.

Borrowing from Roach's argument that Minaj's Barbie is a strategy of *disidentification*, Minaj's *alter egoing* through Chun-Li becomes a survival strategy for navigating the double-bindedness of Black womanhood in popular culture and rap, for those "who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship."¹⁷⁴ Such *alter egoing* can be understood as a queer performance art piece of disidentification, "artificial and layered" display that neither assimilates

¹⁷² Morris Low, "The birth of Godzilla: Nuclear fear and the ideology of Japan as victim." *Japanese Studies* 13, no. 2 (1993): 48-58; David Deamer, *Deleuze, Japanese Cinema, and the Atom Bomb : The Spectre of Impossibility*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2014.

¹⁷³ M. McWhertor, (2018, April 12). *Nicki Minaj's 'CHUN-LI' isn't really About chun-li*. Polygon. Retrieved September 29, 2021, from <https://www.polygon.com/2018/4/12/17229970/nicki-minaj-chun-li-music-video>.

¹⁷⁴ Shoniqua Roach, "Black Respectable Currency: Reading Black Feminism and Sexuality in Contemporary Performance." *Journal of American culture* (Malden, Mass.) 42, no. 1 (March 2019): 10–20; Muñoz, José E. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (U of Minnesota P, 1999), 4.

to nor strictly opposes dominant regimes of identity construction.¹⁷⁵ Chun-Li stands in contrast to Barbie and Roman Zolanski, differently exhibiting the melancholy nature of Minaj's *alter egoing*. Her "I can do anything" girl-boss attitude is undermined by insufficiently resilient alter egos that reside in a racist heteropatriarchal marketplace, and yet crafts an "intercultural queer positionalit[y] that trouble[s] the dominant heteropatriarchal discourse of Black politics."¹⁷⁶

3.7 Conclusion

I categorize *ecstatic disidentification* as a Black feminist theoretical framework. Many Black feminist theorists have long dedicated their scholarship to theorizing the uniquely oppressive white male gaze on Black female bodies, incited by the history of enslavement of African-descended people and its contemporary traces. With the iconic 19th-century case of Sarah Baartman and the abhorrently public use of her flesh in the purview of Black feminist theorists' work, Black women who lean into their racialized sexuality, who work within oppressive logics, are frequently accused of servicing oppression.¹⁷⁷ Furthermore, in popular criticism, Minaj (and other female rappers like Lil' Kim and Cardi B) are said to exemplify imperfect feminism and

¹⁷⁵ Jose Esteban Muñoz, (2009). *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. NYU Press; Anne Anlin Cheng. "Ornamentalism: A Feminist Theory for the Yellow Woman." *Critical inquiry* 44, no. 3 (2018): 415–446; Cheng, 429. Scholar Anne Anlin Cheng describes a specific racialized aestheticization that she calls *ornamentalism*, which identifies a process of personhood conceived through ornamental (minute, sartorial, prosthetic, decorative) gestures.

¹⁷⁶ Fulton Hall, "Elliott Powell: Super Freaks and ATliens: The Queer Afro-South Asian Aesthetic Futures of Rick James and Outkast." Division of the Humanities, March 2, 2018. <https://humanities.uchicago.edu/calendar/details/CAL-ff808081-60d9dc4f-0160-dbd9525f-0000251eeventscalendar%2540uchicago.edu>.

¹⁷⁷ For a critique on the disciplinary impulse to situate Sarah Baartman as a black feminist bio-mythography, see Shoniqua Roach, "Black Respectable Currency: Reading Black Feminism and Sexuality in Contemporary Performance." *Journal of American culture* (Malden, Mass.) 42, no. 1 (March 2019): 10–20. Scholars have criticized Minaj for objectifying her body and primarily conforming to white beauty ideals (hooks 2014, 2016 and for "Skinny shaming" (Veiga 2014), just to name a few of the many accusations.

hypocrisy.¹⁷⁸ My designation of Minaj as a Black feminist figure whose artistic practice performs *ecstatic disidentification* may thus seem at odds with many feminist critiques of the rapper from Queens.

It is also worth noting that a significant portion of feminist critique does not consider being an active participant in the neoliberal marketplace or making oneself a product emancipatory. Many feminist scholars build the case that the body as product is not subversive, that women's bodies are exploited by capitalism, and it is only through the dismantling of capitalism that women are liberated.¹⁷⁹

Using philosopher Robin James's dissection of late-capitalism through the framing of neoliberalism and pop music, one may interpret Minaj's success as evidence of a racialized subject being unwittingly embedded into multi-racial white supremacist patriarchy (*i.e. MRWaSP*).¹⁸⁰ In James's formulation, artists that perform narratives of overcoming, or *resilience*, are folded into the hegemony as evidence of the "good health" of the neoliberal status quo (as in Beyoncé's *Lemonade*). On the other hand, artists who are unable to recycle their "damage" (read: deviant gender, deviant race, or deviant sexuality) into a consumable product are said to exhibit *melancholy* (such as Rihanna's *Unapologetic*). James's definition of melancholy is specific to her particular critique of neoliberalism, in that, "melancholy is failed or inefficient self-capitalization, an insufficiently profitable venture. [...] Melancholy is the refusal to do the affective cultural labor MRWaSP capitalism requires of potentially resilient people."¹⁸¹ With such singles as "Super Bass"

¹⁷⁸ Aliza Vigderman, "My Anaconda Don't: A Black Feminist Analysis of Nicki Minaj." *Medium*. Black Feminism, April 30, 2015. <https://medium.com/black-feminism/my-anaconda-don-t-a-black-feminist-analysis-of-nicki-minaj-fc053629485f>; J'na Jefferson, "'Queen' And The Hypocrisy Of Nicki Minaj's Feminism." VIBE.com, June 21, 2020. <https://www.vibe.com/features/opinion/nicki-minaj-queen-feminism-oped-594840/>

¹⁷⁹ Astrid Henry, *Not My Mother's Sister: Generational Conflict and Third-Wave Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

¹⁸⁰ Robin James. *Resilience & Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism* (Lanham: John Hunt Publishing, 2015), 12.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 129.

and “Starships,” Minaj’s crossover success as a Black woman topping the pop charts, appears to render her a non-subversive, *resilient* actor in the neoliberal marketplace, as per MRWaSP.

The pop consumability of Minaj’s albums, however, belie the melancholy nature of her alter egos therein. As put by Margaret Hunter and Alheli Cuenca,

“Minaj seems to be mimicking the cultural derision of black women more generally by pushing this racist image to its breaking point. When she uses the quote about “nappy headed hoes” from Don Imus, it seems to confirm that this is, in fact, a parody of the excessive racism our culture is saturated with.”¹⁸²

Adding to the negative reception of Minaj’s work, Hot 97’s radio DJ Rosenberg explains his disaffection for Minaj’s pop singles—“We have a culture, a culture we love”—insinuating that the craft of pop is antithetical to hip hop’s culture of organic street authenticity.¹⁸³ As noted in the introduction, authenticity in U.S popular music has been coded masculine, both in genre, such as conventional hip hop, and in media format, like the concept album. Other critics condemn Nicki Minaj for what they consider sell-out neoliberalism, a critique that is complicated by American studies scholar, Aria S. Halliday. Summarizing Baldwin, Halliday explains how historically, “Black people saw freedom exacted through the ability to consume and produce in the marketplace, a partial embrace of neoliberalism to assert themselves as citizens.”¹⁸⁴

¹⁸² Margaret Hunter and Alheli Cuenca, “Nicki Minaj and the Changing Politics of Hip-Hop: Real Blackness, Real Bodies, Real Feminism?” *Feminist Formations*, Baltimore Vol. 29, Iss. 2, (Summer 2017): 41.

¹⁸³ “Nicki Minaj vs Rosenberg Face to Face!!,” YouTube video, 27:58, posted by “HOT 97,” May 28, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7KC4kL5CE8>

For hip hop authenticity, see Kajikawa, L. (2015). *Sounding Race in Rap Songs*. University of California Press; Davis, R. C. & Gross, D. S. (1994); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and the Ethos of the Subaltern; J. S. Bauman & T. F. Bauman (Eds.), *Ethos: New Essays in Rhetorical and Critical Theory*. Southern Methodist University Press, 65-69; Harrison, A. K. & Arthur, C. E. (2019). Hip-Hop Ethos. *Humanities*, 8(1), 1-14; “Rap cover songs don’t exist (and here’s why),” YouTube video, 16:40, posted by “Adam Neely,” September 22, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D_mh1Rq35ZM.

¹⁸⁴ Aria S. Halliday, “Fashioning Black Barbies, Princesses, and Sexual Expression for Black Girls: The Multivisuality of Nicki Minaj” (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2017), 89.

The foregrounding of Minaj's exposed flesh as product aligns with Meredith LeVande's analysis of pop music performances by women of color as generally pornified.¹⁸⁵ What further connects this pornification of women performers to Minaj is Patricia Hill Collins' theory of sex work and its profound reorientation around Black bodies.¹⁸⁶ Minaj then is doubly porned by the nature of her profession and her race. This does not mean that the integrity of her personhood is in peril: it does not remove Minaj's agency. In fact, Nash's call to turn towards the Black subject and her pleasure, and away from the logics of injury, maps onto LeVande's and Collins's frameworks, giving Minaj a unique and powerful position in the discourse on the sexualization of Black women in popular culture. For example, Minaj's body-product, to use Hunter and Cuenca's neologism, destabilizes the rap genre, and disorients the consumer by simultaneously embodying rapper and video vixen. One of the most iconic examples of this is "Anaconda."¹⁸⁷ "Anaconda" (along with "Super Bass") offers up lightly clad, full-figured women, but instead of having a central male figure glorying in their exposed flesh, Minaj flexes and stunts. Instead of following misogynistic logics, Minaj strategically creates a neoliberal product that requires a specific gaze *from the consumer*. In other words, her body-product demands an interaction with her product, an interaction that she herself curates. Minaj forcefully shoves her body-product, a parody of neoliberal heterosexist consumerism, into the masses' hands through lyrics, music videos and social media presence.

¹⁸⁵ Meredith LeVande, "Women, Pop Music, and Pornography." *Meridians* 8, 1 (2008): 293–321. For more on race as pornographic fantasy, see Margaret Hunter and Alhelí Cuenca, "Nicki Minaj and the Changing Politics of Hip-Hop: Real Blackness, Real Bodies, Real Feminism?" *Feminist Formations*, Baltimore Vol. 29, Iss. 2, (Summer 2017): 41; Jennifer C. Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 6.

¹⁸⁶ Patricia Hill Collins, 2004. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge).

¹⁸⁷ Released in 2014 as a single for *The Pinkprint*.

What is interesting to me about the concept of body-product and Minaj's use of it is its dependence on 1) Minaj's physical body and 2) her reliance on *alter egoing*. Through her use of the body-product, whether it be by way of Roman Zolanski, Barbie or Chun-Li, she spins a narrative that is tied to a character, which cannot be divorced from her performing body, her flesh.

Minaj's acts of *ecstatic disidentification* are not unilaterally regressive by their circulation within a neoliberal marketplace. Minaj's currency in the neoliberal marketplace, her creative curation of the body and voice as a product to be consumed by fans through visual media and social media, and her performance of cultural tropes as more and other than their harmful instantiation has led the way for other artists, like Lil Nas X and Doja Cat. Minaj has mapped out a method of *ecstatic disidentification* for others to follow and allowing for various possibilities in the Black feminist theoretical archive.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁸ Margaret Hunter and Alhelí Cuenca, "Nicki Minaj and the Changing Politics of Hip-Hop: Real Blackness, Real Bodies, Real Feminism?" *Feminist Formations* 29, no. 2 (2017): 34.

4.0 Beyoncé: Sasha Fierce, Formation Beyoncé, Pan-African Mother

4.1 Introduction

“Beyoncé reminds us about the particular bodies that are able to transgress boundaries[...].” -Aisha S. Durham, “Home with Hip Hop Feminism.”¹⁸⁹

Beyoncé Knowles-Carter, or Beyoncé as she is popularly known, is undoubtedly an icon in American popular culture. Throughout the course of Beyoncé’s career—which includes singer, songwriter, actress, and businessperson—she has earned an incredible number of awards and accolades. Beyoncé has become the most-awarded artist in the MTV Video Music Awards show history (26 awards, including 12 individual awards) and the most-awarded artist at the BET Awards and the Soul Train Awards. With a total of 28 awards and 79 nominations, Beyoncé is the second-most awarded person and the most nominated woman in Grammy history.¹⁹⁰ She is the eighth-most-awarded artist at the Billboard Music Awards, with 13 awards. In 2002, Beyoncé became the first African American woman to win the Songwriter of the Year award from American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers. According to the online database IMDB, Beyoncé has won 92 awards and has been nominated 219 times.¹⁹¹ On top of all these accomplishments, Beyoncé’s net worth is estimated to be roughly \$500 million, making her one of the richest singers

¹⁸⁹ Aisha S. Durham, *Home with Hip Hop Feminism : Performances in Communication and Culture* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2014), 81.

¹⁹⁰ Samantha Hissong, “Beyoncé Officially Has More Grammy Wins Than Any Other Performer.” *Rolling Stone*, March 15, 2021. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/beyonce-officially-has-more-grammy-wins-than-any-other-performer-1141689/>.

¹⁹¹ “Beyoncé.” IMDb. IMDb.com. Accessed October 30, 2021. <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0461498/awards>.

in the entire world. She has a carefully curated image that has sustained a lasting career, from her Destiny's Child days to her current status as a Black business mogul.

Although Beyoncé has accrued significant wealth and national (even global) popularity, this success has not released her from the white regulatory gaze.¹⁹² Such scholars as Ellis Cashmore and Shoniqua Roach have noted the ways Beyoncé is required to walk the specific tightrope of respectability politics reserved for successful Black women.¹⁹³ Cashmore describes key strategies—used by the star figure herself and some implicitly mobilized—that allowed Beyoncé to exercise large degrees of agency even while under the surveillance of the white regulatory gaze.¹⁹⁴ These features include her early self-presentation as ethnically ambiguous (rather than explicitly Black), her body's alignment with western beauty ideals, and her adherence to heteronormativity by way of marriage to Jay-Z. These all provide her with enough neoliberal cultural capital, it is argued, to belong to the ranks of the “particular bodies that are able to transgress boundaries” as noted in the quote above.¹⁹⁵

Beyoncé has created only one explicitly named alter ego so far, in contrast with Janelle Monáe and Nicki Minaj (discussed in the two previous chapters). This alter ego, Sasha Fierce, differs in important ways from those created by these other two artists. Rather than acting as a protagonist of an elaborate science fiction story (Monáe's Cindi Mayweather) or a gender-defying “demon” (Minaj's Roman Zolanski), Beyoncé's alter ego functions as a performance costume, or shield. In Beyoncé's own words, she puts on Sasha Fierce when “it's time for me to work, when

¹⁹² Brittney C. Cooper (blogging as “crunktastic”), “(Un)Clutching My Mother's Pearls, or Ratchetness and the Residue of Respectability,” *The Crunk Feminist Collection* (blog), December 31, 2012.

¹⁹³ Shoniqua Roach, “Black Respectable Currency: Reading Black Feminism and Sexuality in Contemporary Performance,” *Journal of American culture* (Malden, Mass.) 42, no. 1 (2019): 10–20.

¹⁹⁴ Ellis Cashmore, “Buying Beyoncé,” *Celebrity Studies* 1.2 (2010): 144; Ashley Payne, “The Cardi B–Beyoncé Complex: Ratchet Respectability and Black Adolescent Girlhood,” *The Journal of Hip Hop Studies* 7, no. 1 (July 1, 2020): 26–116.

¹⁹⁵ Aisha S. Durham, *Home with Hip Hop Feminism: Performances in Communication and Culture* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2014), 81.

I'm on stage. This alter ego that I've created protects me and who I really am."¹⁹⁶ Although Beyoncé has formally retired Sasha Fierce—according to a 2010 interview with *Allure* magazine, she “killed her”—she continues to use a method of disidentification in the form of *alter egoing*.¹⁹⁷ In this chapter, I explore how these methods enable Beyoncé's balancing act between the respectable and the sexy, the pop activist and the socially-conscious entertainer, the business person and the diva.

In my analysis I identify three distinct phases of Beyoncé as the following: “Sasha Fierce,” with the release of the 2008 album *I Am... Sasha Fierce*; “Formation Beyoncé” initiated by the surprise release of the single “Formation” and the 2016 Super Bowl halftime show; and finally, “Pan-African Mother” in *Black Is King* (2020). I argue that these successive transitions outline Beyoncé's *alter egoing* as an ongoing process, a continuously evolving strategy. Furthermore, in tracking Beyoncé's shifting personas in the context of the affective environment of contemporary US political culture, her unique practice of *alter egoing* emerges as less a marketing maneuver than a legible practice of disidentification.

This chapter is divided into three parts: “Sasha Fierce, Universality, and Black Cyberfeminist Aesthetics,” “Formation Beyoncé, Specifically Black” and “Pan-African Mother: The Universalizing of American Blackness.” First, I explore Beyoncé's use of Sasha Fierce in the context of pop feminism universality, branding, and the Obamification of hip hop.¹⁹⁸ Then I analyze Beyoncé's turn towards specificity through her sonic and visual conjuring of the Black

¹⁹⁶ Michelle Konstantinovsky, “On Supergirls, Sasha Fierce, Slim Shady and Having an Alter Ego.” *PBS*. Public Broadcasting Service, September 16, 2019. <https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/blog/on-supergirls-sasha-fierce-slim-shady-and-having-an-alter-ego/>.

¹⁹⁷ Hillary Crosley, “Beyonce Says She 'Killed' Sasha Fierce.” *MTV News*, February 26, 2010. <http://www.mtv.com/news/1632774/beyonce-says-she-killed-sasha-fierce/>.

¹⁹⁸ “Obamification of rap” is defined as a “brief renaissance of socially conscious lyrics and the widespread participation of celebrity rappers in the political process.” See, Travis L. Gosa and Erik Nielson, *The Hip Hop & Obama Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015) 5.

south in the visual album *Lemonade*, wherein she explicitly positions herself as part of an “authentic” Black collective. In the third section of the chapter, I analyze Beyoncé’s universalizing of American Blackness through her performance of motherhood, starting with her live performances while pregnant, to her role in the visual album, *Black Is King*. Through this exploration of *alter egoing*, Beyoncé’s evolution from the universal to the specific, from post-racial diva to unambiguously Black superstar, is made legible as a reaction to contemporary political culture.

Although Beyoncé only explicitly created one alter ego, I use *alter egoing* as a heuristic to unravel the different stages of Beyoncé’s career and the evolution of her performance persona. As I track Beyoncé’s themes of universality, specificity, and her universalizing of American Blackness, her *alter egoing* becomes intellectual labor that maps an ambivalence towards notions of race, gender, and sexuality in the pop feminism of Obama/post-Obama America. Through her various forms of *alter egoing*, I argue that Beyoncé negotiates the intersection of post-race, pop feminism & the specific controlling images this regime imposes on Black women.

4.2 Sasha Fierce, Universality, and Black Cyberfeminist Aesthetics

Without the work of José E. Muñoz and Jennifer Nash, it would be harder to grasp how Beyoncé’s participation and success within the capitalist marketplace is other than complicit in America’s oppressive (racist cis-heteropatriarchal) system. But if the Black cyberfeminist aesthetics Beyoncé uses while *alter egoing* are taken into account, new emancipatory meaning emerges. Sasha Fierce’s universal pop feminism, which on the surface seems to gloss over her

Blackness and promote Obama-era post-raciality, is undermined by Black cyberfeminist aesthetics. Sasha Fierce, thus, becomes a disidentifying figure.

Sasha Fierce entered the music scene in 2008 with the release of Beyoncé's third studio album, *I Am... Sasha Fierce*, put out by Columbia Records and Music World Entertainment. *I Am... Sasha Fierce* was released as a double album, with the first disc titled *I Am...* and the second *Sasha Fierce*. The songs in *I Am...* are primarily slow to midtempo pop ballads inspired by R&B. In contrast to the first disc, *Sasha Fierce* consists of uptempo electropop. At the 52nd Annual Grammy Awards ceremony in 2010, the double album garnered seven Grammy Award nominations and by the end of the ceremony collected a record setting six wins, making Beyoncé a record setter for winning the most awards in one night of any female artist.

The album is interesting for a variety of reasons. My interest, which lies in Black women's disidentification in popular music, was piqued by the album title, which declared an alternate name for one of the most famous mononyms of hip hop. In understanding Sasha Fierce as disidentification, the alter ego bears two distinct, but connected features that start to sketch the tightrope that Beyoncé masterfully walked with the assistance of her alter ego.

Sasha Fierce's apparently femme heterosexuality belie how she insidiously destabilizes cis-heteronormative binaries. For example, Beyoncé describes Sasha Fierce as her "more aggressive, more outspoken side and more glamorous side that comes out when I'm working and when I'm on the stage."¹⁹⁹ In other words, Sasha Fierce simultaneously perpetuates glamor and aggression, two characteristics that Beyoncé was seemingly incapable of embodying without the assistance of her alter ego.

¹⁹⁹ Paul MacInnes, "Beyoncé? We Think You Mean Sasha Fierce." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, October 24, 2008. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2008/oct/24/beyonce-sasha-fierce>.

Glamor is a traditionally feminine feature that is typically confined to figures that embody upward mobility and respectability. A historical case in point is Motown's image curation of their 1960s Black girl groups, such as the Shirelles and the Supremes.²⁰⁰ The shaping of girl groups, specifically non-white girl groups in the 1960s, into glamorous commodities increased their marketability to both Black and white middle class audiences and consumers.

Sasha Fierce is not only glamorous, but aggressive. As a somehow separate entity, the alter ego allows Beyoncé to safely appropriate aggression for herself. *Alter egoing* enables this duality. By attributing glamor and aggression to Sasha Fierce, Beyoncé is protected from some of the critiques that have been waged against other Black artists that do not strictly adhere to racially gendered expectations, such as the cases of Beyoncé's direct predecessor Tina Turner, or the 1970s rocker Betty Davis, or Beyoncé's contemporary Lil' Kim, all of whom have been criticized for their aggressive lyrics and performance.²⁰¹ To be sure, Beyoncé has undergone extreme critique, such as bell hook's infamous "terrorist" label.²⁰² However, the duality intrinsic in *alter egoing* permitted the simultaneous display of Beyoncé's respectability off the stage and Sasha Fierce's aggression and glamour in performance. An iconic moment of Sasha Fierce's aggression and glamour, or aggressive glamour, comes at the end of the "Singles Ladies" music video. The music cuts and the medium close-up shot features Sasha Fierce's glamorously coiffed hair noticeably disheveled, her chest heaving after her aggressive approach to the choreography.

Another feature that largely contributes to Sasha Fierce's subversion of the normative gendering of Black women is her engagement with cyberfeminism through the cyborg and sonic

²⁰⁰ Maureen Mahon, *Black Diamond Queens: African American Women and Rock and Roll*. Chap. 3 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

²⁰¹ For more on the gendered expectation of Black women in popular music, see: Maureen Mahon, *Black Diamond Queens: African American Women and Rock and Roll*. Chap. 3 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

²⁰² "bell hooks: Beyoncé Is A Terrorist," FORAtv, August 18, 2014, YouTube video, 0:59, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FS6LNpeJPbw>

evocation of the technological. Afrofuturism, posthumanism and technofeminism all can in some way be applied to the sonic and visual features used in conjunction with Sasha Fierce.²⁰³ As discussed in the Introduction chapter, I take inspiration from Meina Yates-Richard's *black cyberfeminist sonic aesthetics* and label Sasha Fierce's evocation of the technological as *Black cyberfeminist aesthetics*. In using Black cyberfeminist aesthetics to understand Sasha Fierce's sonic and visual techniques, I am signaling both a connection to and a break from Afrofuturism, which is defined by Ytasha Womack as "an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation."²⁰⁴ As per the discussion of Afrofuturism in the Introduction chapter, much of Afrofuturism disregards gender and inadvertently renders the genre implicitly male-centric as the literary genre is dominated by writers who are men. Thus, by invoking Black cyberfeminism, rather than Afrofuturism, I make gender, specifically Black womanhood, an essential matrix of my analysis. Sasha Fierce's use of Black cyberfeminist aesthetics allows Beyoncé to bend gender expectations without severing her from the benefits that come with adherence to respectability politics. In the songs "Diva" and "Single Ladies," Sasha Fierce draws from literary and musical traditions of the technological, which are traditionally marked as masculine, and in turn presents a deviant femininity through *alter egoing*.

The Black cyberfeminist aesthetics in "Diva," "Single Ladies" and the 2007 BET performance connect Beyoncé to science fiction. In the BET performance Beyoncé, like Monáe, pays homage to the pioneering science fiction film, *Metropolis* (1927) by using the imagery of the

²⁰³ For a definition of *Afrofuturism*, refer back to the chapter, "Introduction;" *Posthumanism* generally refers to the theoretical destabilizing of the assumption of the human as the center of the universe and/or orientation, see Mads Rosendahl Thomsen and Jacob Wamberg, *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Posthumanism* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2020). *Technofeminism* refers to the mutual shaping of gender and technology "in which technology is both a source and a consequence of gender relations," see Judy Wajcman, *TechnoFeminism*. Cambridge (UK :: Polity Press, 2004), 7.

²⁰⁴ Ytasha L. Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013) 9.

female android, a foreshadowing of the femme-bot Beyoncé of the “Diva” music video trailer (2010).²⁰⁵ (See Figure 20)



Figure 20: Beyoncé in 2007 BET Awards performance.

The hip hop scholar Tricia Rose, in an interview with Mark Dery in 1994, interrogates the utility of the robot/cyborg/android icon when applied to Black women. In her words:

I'm not troubled by the cyborg *as* an imaginary, but by the fact that it's almost impossible for the average young woman to see herself as a person who could take up that much social space. It suggests a social and psychological containment that makes it impossible for the woman to see themselves as major actors in a technological world.²⁰⁶

Here, Rose voices her discomfort with the cyborg as being a somehow necessary stand-in for women who are unable to simply be human in a technological world that operates according to white patriarchal logics. Although this is a valuable point made by Rose, I perceive women's

²⁰⁵ The classic German expressionist film, directed by Fritz Lang.

²⁰⁶ Tricia Rose qtd in Dery 1994, 216.

current use of the cyborg or android a bit differently. The female android provides a gendered Du Boisian stance. In looking at oneself through the gaze of the oppressor, these instances of cyborg-avatars act to deconstruct the gaze of the oppressor by making sexism explicit. James, in her sonic and visual analysis of “Single Ladies” states that the song isn’t about women, “it’s about robots” and the treatment of women as machines.²⁰⁷ Whereas the song may seem to be promoting marriage, property, and heterosexuality, the sonic evocation of the moving of robotic joints proves Beyoncé’s underlying point that: women, equals robots, equals chattel (women = robots = chattel). “Single Ladies,” understood thusly, is a critique of the 21st-century marriage-industrial complex, and Black women’s distinct restriction therein.²⁰⁸

With this critique of marriage in mind, it is interesting to note that the same year that “Single Ladies” was released, two of the most recognizable Black women in contemporary political and popular culture—Beyoncé and Michelle Obama—became icons of the marriage-industrial complex. Beyoncé traded in her single lady status and married Jay-Z, while Michelle Obama prepared to take residence in the White House as the First Lady of the United States, effectively assuming the role of the quintessential American housewife.

“Diva,” through two distinct media avenues, presents differing ways of performing Black womanhood through Black cyberfeminist aesthetics. Beyoncé has a track record for releasing music in novel ways: visual albums, documentaries, trailers. “Diva” is an interesting case in that not only was a music video released, but two years after the release of the song, a “trailer” was released on *Beyoncé VEVO* on November 10, 2010. This trailer, which starts much like a music video and then shifts to a live staged performance, contains no clear citation of the reason for this

²⁰⁷ Robin James, “‘Single Ladies’ = Robots.” it’s her factory, May 15, 2009.
<https://www.its-her-factory.com/2009/05/single-ladies-robots/>.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

method of release or who produced it. When taking a closer look at this trailer it seems as though Beyoncé uses Sasha Fierce to bring awareness to the very psychological containment that Rose identifies in her interview with Dery. For example, the trailer starts with a monologue in which Beyoncé describes her strenuous work schedule. As she describes how no one pays attention to what her body needs through the rigorous rehearsals, the trailer opens with an android version of Beyoncé, walking stiltedly, encased in plastic and metal (see Figure 21). A closeup on Sasha Fierce's face reveals a tear falling from her eye. This "containment" that the android represents allows for the invisible bonds of the diva to be made visible. When in monologue Beyoncé recounts her demanding rehearsal schedule and her android eyes well up with tears, we are made aware of the marketplace machine to which every pop artist must bend to for success, even the indomitable Sasha Fierce.



Figure 21: Still of Beyoncé in “Diva” trailer

The shot zooms into android Sasha Fierce's eye until her iris evolves into a constellation that fades and overlaps into a packed stadium at a Beyoncé concert. We now see Beyoncé performing live with a screen behind her with shots from the actual music video. Flanking either side of Beyoncé are male and female dancers in skintight gold suits, masks, and skull caps, every bit of human flesh covered in metallic gold, referencing the mannequins from the "Diva" music video. Once Beyoncé starts the iconic head-whipping dance associated with the music video, the lights dim and all you can see is her outline and her illuminated oversized belt, in the general shape of the female reproductive system.

Whereas the trailer for "Diva" seems to focus more on the unrealistic expectations and invisible labor of women, highlighted by the uterine shaped belt, the music video, complete with smoking cigars and car explosions, works more towards troubling the gender binary that the juxtaposition of the terms "diva" and "hustler" evoke. Looking not to the trailer but to the music video, media and American studies scholar Jaap Kooijman argues that in "Diva" Beyoncé copies the masculine style and aesthetics of hip hop, and instead of performing a male fantasy—as is often ascribed to women in hip hop—Sasha Fierce coopts and even mocks hip hop masculinity.²⁰⁹ Despite this difference in message, both the trailer and the music video emphasize the constructed nature of womanhood, specifically Black womanhood, in the disjointed movements of the android of the trailer and dismembered mannequins in the car trunk of the music video. And rather than Haraway's interpretation of the android-cyborg as emancipatory, "Diva"'s cyborg is a dystopian, Stepford wife-like figure.

This brings us back to the "Diva" trailer, in which Beyoncé explicitly recounts the commodification of her body: "Almost nine days without resting my voice, my body and my mind.

²⁰⁹ Jaap Kooijman, "Fierce, Fabulous, and In/Famous: Beyoncé as Black Diva." *Popular Music and Society* 42, no. 1 (January 1, 2019): 12.

And I'm just really upset that I don't have anyone that's concerned about my body and my well-being."²¹⁰ These sonic allusions, taken together with the music video imagery of a cyborg hand (see Figure 22) and dismembered mannequins, in the words of James, "implies that black pop divas are droids, programmed from adolescence to perform as hyperfeminine cyborgs."²¹¹ Thus marks Beyoncé's efforts to work within and potentially subvert gender expectation through the visual and sonic mechanics of her body-product.²¹² I would argue that Beyoncé's evocation of sub- or post-humanhood is not a performance of the hyperfeminine, but rather a destabilizing femme heterosexuality, particularly in "Single Ladies." With a cyborg hand, Sasha Fierce becomes the product of posthuman miscegenation, part human, part android. Sasha Fierce's posthuman miscegenation disqualifies her from normative white femininity. The sound of Sasha Fierce's shortness of breath and her mechanized joints being tightened signal her intersectional fatigue.

²¹⁰ Beyoncé, "Beyoncé - Diva (Trailer)," Beyoncé, November 10, 2010, YouTube video, 3:08, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4BNanYc-tHc>

²¹¹ Robin James, *Resilience & Melancholy: Pop Music, Feminism, Neoliberalism* (Ropley: John Hunt Publishing, 2015), 120.

²¹² Margaret Hunter and Alhelí Cuenca, "Nicki Minaj and the Changing Politics of Hip-Hop: Real Blackness, Real Bodies, Real Feminism?" *Feminist Formations* 29, no. 2 (2017): 26–46.



Figure 22: Still of Beyoncé with a robotic hand in the music video “Single Ladies.”

The fatigue that Beyoncé voices in “Diva” and “Single Ladies” can be understood as a gendered weariness. Femininity is a commodifiable theme in which one-half of the world could presumably identify with and consume. During this Sasha Fierce era, the themes of Beyoncé’s music consisted primarily of pop feminist anthems, girl power, and romance. The strong emphasis on themes of gender worked to gloss over her Blackness and make her appear more universal. Cashmore pushes the idea of Sasha Fierce as a neoliberal brand, offering a mixed indictment of the alter ego, pronouncing her the “most preposterous yet accomplished industrial innovation yet.”²¹³ Through his analysis, Cashmore observes what he perceives as Beyoncé’s most intangible product: the post-raciality of America. And therein lies Beyoncé’s connection to the circulation of politicized affects surrounding the 2008 election of Barack Obama (audacious hope and post-racial optimism).

²¹³ Ellis Cashmore, “Buying Beyoncé,” *Celebrity Studies* 1, no. 2 (2010): 141. A concise definition of neoliberalism entails seeing every aspect of society, even those typically considered civic or community affairs, in the terms of the market economy.

Even while white (male) nostalgia bubbled below the surface of political and popular culture, Obama's audacious hope promoted later during his campaign and presidency leached into contemporary popular culture. At the 2008 Democratic Convention, Jay-Z voiced the belief of many hopeful others, saying: "you can be anything you want to be in the world. Black people are no longer left out of the American dream."²¹⁴ The post-race optimism of Obama and Jay-Z seemed reflected in, or was perhaps influenced by, Sasha Fierce's lyrics that elide race.

Without considering Sasha Fierce's reliance on Black cyberfeminist aesthetics, I would agree with Cashmore's neoliberal critique of Beyoncé, that Sasha Fierce was created to be an open source material, an easily consumable product. Attending to the aesthetics that make up Sasha Fierce, however, complicates this reading. This idea of closed-source versus open-source material, or put another way, universality versus specificity, brings us back to Sasha Fierce's engagement with the circulation of politicized affects surrounding the 2008 election of Obama. Even though Sasha Fierce used Black cyberfeminist aesthetics, which directly connects her to critiques of race, her broader critique of the patriarchy was more overt. In other words, in this era of *alter egoing* Beyoncé's elision of race gave Sasha Fierce a perceived universality that fit with the Obama-era optimism of post-racality.

Only weeks into Obama's administration, Obama's audacious hope in postracial universality was undercut by a rising awareness of police brutality in popular media. In January 2009 in Oakland, California Johannes Mehserle, a transit officer, shot the 22-year-old unarmed Black man Oscar Grant. The brutality of the murder, a young man, handcuffed and lying face-down on the public transportation platform, extinguished much of the optimism of those who believed that with the 2008 Democratic win of the White House the nation was moving away from

²¹⁴ Travis L. Gosa and Erik Nielson. *The Hip Hop & Obama Reader*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 5.

its racist history, towards a postracial, meritocratic utopia. Keeanga-Yamahtta Tayolor writes in *The Guardian*:

The optimism that coursed through black America in 2008 seemed a million miles away.[...] As for President Obama, he turned out to be very different from candidate Obama, who had stage-managed his campaign to resemble something closer to a social movement. He had conjured much hope, especially among African Americans – but with great expectations came even greater disappointments.²¹⁵

Obama's administration proved that having a Black president does not automatically eradicate racism in America, moreover, that the Black experience is not universally American. The highly publicized and politicized murder of Oscar Grant, a Black man, at the hands of a white servicemen exposed the fallacy of America as postracial.

4.3 Formation Beyoncé and Black Specificity

“[T]he management of Beyoncé's narrative as a black female activist involves the careful management of the coding of her blackness.”²¹⁶ – Sarah Olutola

Beyoncé's racially universal girl-boss alter ego disappeared and was replaced with a Beyoncé that explicitly promoted Blackness. Beyoncé's careful management of her Blackness, from postracial girl-boss universality to Southern Black specificity, leads me to ask, what coding of Blackness did Sasha Fierce provide, and why did Beyoncé see fit to retire this alter ego and craft an *alter egoing* practice that effectively adjusted the shade of her Blackness? In pursuit of the answer to this question, I turn to the iconic moment when Beyoncé overtly aligned herself with

²¹⁵ Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, “Barack Obama's Original Sin: America's Post-racial Illusion,” (2017, January 13). <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/13/barack-obama-legacy-racism-criminal-justice-system>.

²¹⁶ Sarah Olutola, “I Ain't Sorry: Beyoncé, Serena, and Hegemonic Hierarchies in Lemonade.” *Popular Music and Society: Special Issue on Beyoncé*, 42, no. 1 (January 1, 2019), 105.

poor southern Black America. In the opening scene of the music video, “Formation,” Beyoncé sits atop a police car surrounded by homes partially submerged in water. Post-Katrina New Orleans is visually conjured and confirmed by New Orleanian rapper and YouTube personality Messy Mya’s disembodied question: “What happened at the New Orleans?” The next five shots feature symbols of police and Black bodies in movement, visuals which 21st-century American sensibilities connect to police brutality on Black Americans and the BlackLivesMatter movement. The scene jumps from New Orleanian neighborhoods to a suited Black preacher at a pulpit, to homes in flooded wreckage. In the first moments of “Formation,” Beyoncé plants herself in the Black south. With such lyrics as “Jackson 5 nostrils” and insider references as “hot sauce in my bag, swag,” Formation Beyoncé emerges and extinguishes the open-source universality of Sasha Fierce, firmly fixing Beyoncé to an “authentic” Black collective. Or, in of lyrics “Formation,” “You mix that Negro with that Creole make a Texas Bama.”

As Beyoncé’s *alter ego* shifted towards explicit Blackness, the American political culture likewise leaned more heavily into identity politics and politicized affects. Upon the symbolic unseating of whiteness from the nation’s most powerful position, a turn toward nostalgia, specifically white (male) nostalgia, arose in US political culture. Michael Kimmel analyzes this political affective shift—specifically analyzing the distinct anger expressed by white men—noting the ironic dissonance of Obama’s audacious hopefulness and the incumbent warning signs of MAGA-culture:

It’s ironic, since the election of Barack Obama, the first African American president of the United States, was meant to suggest that America was becoming a “postracial” society. [...] But Obama’s election and reelection have actually elicited the most viciously racist public discourse—only thinly veiled behind well-worn code words—in which Tea Partiers and other activists shout racial epithets at elected members of Congress, and half of those partiers believe that Obama has usurped the presidency, having been born outside of the United States.[...] Having declared ourselves postracial, suddenly white people have given themselves *more* permission to express deep-seated racism. It’s as if having a

specific target for their rage enables their racism, because they have already congratulated themselves for not believing those racial slurs about ‘all of them.’²¹⁷

4.3.1 Shifts in Hip Hop

Despite the rise in white (male) nostalgia and the disappointment of those who saw the disparity between candidate Obama and President Obama, some streams of hip hop took on positive narratives and aligned with Obama’s audacious hopefulness.”²¹⁸ Jay-Z, Ludracris, Lil Wayne, Big Boi, and Will.i.am are just a few known for their interpellation of Obamification.²¹⁹ Although hip hop politics have always been heterogeneous, the optimistic trend of the Obama era is a distinct shift in the genre, as hip hop themes have been historically critical of America from the genre’s inception in the 1970s as marginalized Black Americans and Puerto Ricans in the Bronx voiced their discontent in response to government neglect and increasingly unlivable conditions.²²⁰

There have always been popular music artists voicing more critical stances, but a distinct cohort of hip hop artists emerged during the 2010s. They produced music that aligned with the historical roots of the genre, acutely accusing the governing forces of marshal action towards people of color. Their musical (and extra-musical) output is distinct in its use of the visual rhetoric of the Black Lives Matter movement, from Childish Gambino’s surrealist exposition of Black death in “This is America” (2018) to Janelle Monáe’s “Americans” (2018). Many artists of color have used police brutality and Black surveillance as themes in their music; one of the more recent

²¹⁷ Michael S. Kimmel, *Angry White Men : American Masculinity at the End of an Era* (New York: Nation Books, 2013), 6-7.

²¹⁸ Erik Nielson, “My President is Black, My Lambo’s Blue”: The Obamafication of Rap?, *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 31, no. 2 (June 2019): 37-50.

²¹⁹ Travis L. Gosa and Erik Nielson, *The Hip Hop & Obama Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 286.

²²⁰ Ronald Michael Radano and Tejumola Olaniyan, *Audible Empire: Music, Global Politics, Critique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 293.

releases is an emotion picture, “Turntables,” by Janelle Monáe that addresses Black voter suppression and BLM protests. In *Audible Empire: Music, Global Politics, Critique*, Ronald Michael Radano and Tejumola Olaniyan argue that, “If understanding the myriad ways that the U.S. state wields its power within and outside the boundaries of its nation requires a historical contextualization, hip hop offers a method of critical analysis that links the present to the past.”²²¹ In the watershed moment in US political history that was the election of Obama, hip hop maintained a logic of ambivalence, perhaps best exemplified by Killer Mike, in and out of his music simultaneously “accuses Obama of betraying American citizens, even as he insists that *not* supporting the [former] president amounts to a thing of treachery in and of itself.”²²²

The emergence of Formation Beyoncé coincided both with Obama’s administration and the rise in a neo-racist pre-MAGA rhetoric in American political culture. In Stephanie Li’s introduction to Beyoncé, she connects contemporary political culture and the rise of Beyoncé’s status as cultural icon. To quote in full, Li says of Beyoncé:

Like a politician, she vacillates and changes her image to conform to broader social shifts. Not only has Beyoncé changed, but the demands and needs of our contemporary moment have radically shifted as well. Much of her popularity derives from her canny ability to read and respond to both the musical and popular marketplaces. It is no coincidence that Beyoncé has emerged as a powerful media and cultural force during the most significant political movement since the civil rights era: Black Lives Matter.²²³

Beyoncé has shifted away from her girl-boss alter ego and instead has performed a different but related strategy, an alter ego in the time of BackLivesMatter, which I call “Formation Beyoncé.”

I want to mark this point in my analysis with what I see as an intervention in the conventional understanding of Beyoncé’s image as a curated brand, put simply, that Beyoncé’s

²²¹ Ibid., 294.

²²² Travis L. Gosa and Erik Nielson, *The Hip Hop & Obama Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 5.

²²³ Stephanie Li, “Introduction: Who is Beyoncé?” *Black Camera*, Vol. 9, No. 1, (Fall 2017): 110.

public image is always a carefully controlled response to the free market and never authentically unrehearsed, thus devoid of emancipatory potential. My application of *alter egoing* to Beyoncé complicates the assessment of her shifting image as solely an opportunistic maneuvering. I am not arguing against the idea that Beyoncé can be understood as a type of business that is responding to the free market. *Alter egoing* allows me to interrogate Beyoncé's disidentifying potential, and identify how *particular* Beyoncés express agency even while operating within commercial constraints of a neoliberal marketplace. Even though Beyoncé never claims to have created an alter ego aside from Sasha Fierce, the *alter egoing* heuristic highlights her distinct curation of affect through an implied backstory and a trackable, consistent identity-formation narrative.

4.3.2 *Lemonade's* Shaping of Specificity

Lemonade was released on April 23, 2016. It was precluded with no publicity or advertising and dropped as a surprise album with an accompanying visual album. The album was released by Parkwood Entertainment and Columbia Records, and the visual album on HBO. "Formation" was the lead single for *Lemonade*. It was released on February 6, 2016 through Parkwood Entertainment and met with critical acclaim.²²⁴ A day after its premiere, Beyoncé performed "Formation" during her guest performance at the Superbowl 50 halftime show. *Lemonade* (the album and visual album) follows Beyoncé through her experience of Jay-Z's infidelity. The album consists of different affective phases Beyoncé experiences on her way to forgiving her husband. "Formation" is an anomaly in that it functions as a kind of coda, coming after the resolution of

²²⁴ Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley and Caitlin O'Neill, "Beyonce's 'Formation' Is Activism for African Americans, Women and LGBTQ People," *TIME.com*. Retrieved 2016-02-09.

Beyoncé's story and is thematically separate from the rest of the album. It does not express Beyoncé's feelings towards Jay-Z. It is instead an anthem for Black women in the context of BLM.

The release of "Formation" marked a distinct turn in Beyoncé's image. I will refer to this change in Beyoncé—the artist, activist, brand and business mogul, and all that makes up Beyoncé during this time—as "Formation Beyoncé." The album from which Formation Beyoncé emerges is the most genre diverse of all her albums. *Lemonade* includes R&B ("Pray You Catch Me," "6 Inch," "Love Drought"), reggae ("Hold Up"), rock ("Don't Hurt Yourself"), dance ("Sorry"), country ("Daddy Lessons"), ballad ("Sandcastles"), soul ("Freedom"), and of course hip hop which is primarily represented in "Formation." Amidst this demonstration of genre flexibility, Formation Beyoncé signals a turn towards the specific with such lyrics as "My daddy Alabama, Momma Louisiana/You mix that negro with the Creole make a Texas bama." Formation Beyoncé is the specific experience of a Black woman living in the American South. *Saturday Night Live* declared that the release of "Formation" was "The Day Beyoncé Turned Black."²²⁵ As put by Lauren V. Highsmith,

Creole and proud, Beyoncé is known to unashamedly put on for (yet simultaneously commodify) her Louisiana roots in her art, and did so again when using Vodún as the aesthetic and ideological thread for her 2016 visual album *Lemonade*. Engaging and deploying motifs of Yoruba Orisha, BaKongo cosmology, and Mende ritual, Beyoncé created a contemporary narrative for Black femme spiritual liberation.²²⁶

This may seem more an assessment of fan reception, however, if you remember the words of Beyoncé during her Sasha Fierce era, she had once said, "I'm universal . . . no one's paying attention to what race I am. I've kind of proven myself. I'm past that" (2009).²²⁷ So, this turn from

²²⁵ "The Day Beyoncé Turned Black." *Saturday Night Live* season 41, episode 13, National Broadcasting Company, 2016.

²²⁶ Lauren V. Highsmith, "Beyoncé Reborn: *Lemonade* as Spiritual Enlightenment," In *The Lemonade Reader*, 133–143. 1st ed. (Routledge, 2019), 133.

²²⁷ Ellis Cashmore, "Buying Beyoncé." *Celebrity Studies* 1.2 (2010): 144.

universality—a term often subconsciously conflated with whiteness—to specificity was not just in the perception of the viewers of *Lemonade*, it was literally stated by the singer herself.

Celebrities act as guideposts pointing out shortcuts to “the good life,” as put by Wilson and Gutiérrez.²²⁸ In the specific case of pre-*Lemonade* Beyoncé, the shortcut to the American dream is the belief that race is no longer an issue, thus her intense focus on girl power, feminism, and issues of gender. According to Cashmore, “the most valuable product Beyoncé sells is a particular conception of America – as a nation where history has been, if not banished, rendered insignificant. Her ability to do so is predicated on her ethnic ambiguity.”²²⁹ This perceived “ethnic ambiguity” is a luxury not afforded to all Black women. As we will see with the release of “Formation,” however, Beyoncé turns towards producing closed content, or content that has an exclusive audience (read: not white). It is with this release that the ambiguity, or universality of Sasha Fierce is decidedly rejected; it is with this release that “Beyoncé Turned Black.”²³⁰ “Formation” was the song and music video that crystallized this turn towards Black femaleness in America.

Instead of severing commercially-motivated universalization from Formation Beyoncé, Sarah Olutola notes the uncomfortable relationship between Beyoncé’s *Lemonade*-era mixing of social activism and commercialism. She argues that:

As Eurocentric logics of race, capitalism, patriarchy, and biopolitical control mix uncomfortably with the pervasive message of black power, the film exposes the inconsistencies that have ultimately arisen in Beyoncé’s public persona as she has attempted to absorb social justice movements into a radical, but consumable brand – a brand that both challenges and placates the demands of a neoliberal and white supremacist music industry.²³¹

²²⁸ C.C. Wilson and F. Gutiérrez, F., “Minorities and Media: Diversity and the End of the Mass Communication,” (London: Sage, 1985), 128.

²²⁹ Cashmore, 135.

²³⁰ “The Day Beyoncé Turned Black.” Saturday Night Live season 41, episode13, National Broadcasting Company, 2016.

²³¹ Sarah Olutola, “I Ain’t Sorry: Beyoncé, Serena, and Hegemonic Hierarchies in *Lemonade*.” *Popular Music and Society: Special Issue on Beyoncé* 42, no. 1 (January 1, 2019): 101.

With the specific form Beyoncé took to “turn Black,” she simultaneously aligned herself with Black activism and Black power. With her highly visible performance of “Formation” at the Superbowl, she strengthened her own brand by linking it to Black resistance movements in the post-Ferguson era. Through this linkage she ensured her success by crafting herself as a symbol of Black activism.

Formation Beyoncé’s *alter egoing* was tied to Blackness but was also accompanied with different representations of gender and sexuality. In recalling Sasha Fierce, I determined that she provided Beyoncé an avenue for gender-bending, destabilizing both hip hop masculinity and Black femininity. Formation Beyoncé also offers new representations of gender and sexuality. The notable switch from the universally accessible girl-boss feminism of Sasha Fierce to the militantly deep-Southern Black American specificity of Formation Beyoncé was accompanied by notably queer resonances. Musicologist Lauron Kehrer looks at *Lemonade*, zeroes in on “Formation” and points out its queer musical lineage.²³² She notes the use of Big Freedia and Messy Mya’s voice, both queer performers of New Orleans bounce.²³³ She also notes Beyoncé’s late public acceptance of queer culture in tandem with the decrease in professional risk due to recent legal victories and a wider social acceptance of LGBTQ culture.²³⁴ Kehrer has valid criticism of Beyoncé, which include “Formation’s” erasure of queer voices through its lack of crediting of her queer inspiration and her silence on the death of Messy Mya. Kehrer, however, does not shy away from pointing out the ways in which “Formation” and *Lemonade* as a whole helps queer populations. Kehrer argues that:

²³² Lauron Kehrer, “Who Slays? Queer Resonances in Beyoncé’s *Lemonade*.” *Popular Music and Society: Special Issue on Beyoncé* 42, no. 1 (January 1, 2019): 82–98.

²³³ For more on New Orleans bounce, a dance-based style of hip hop that developed in the city beginning in the early 1990s, see Lauron Kehrer, “Who Slays? Queer Resonances in Beyoncé’s *Lemonade*.” *Popular Music and Society: Special Issue on Beyoncé* 42, no. 1 (January 1, 2019): 91.

²³⁴ Kehrer, 84

In *Lemonade*, the evocations of Ballroom, sissy bounce, and other largely queer cultures help to support these reconfigurations of kinship by offering alternative kinship models that are not predicated on white supremacist heteropatriarchal familial structures, i.e. structures modeled on a nuclear family. In other words, the resonances of queer relationship structures suggest alternative, non-oppressive models that are echoed in Beyoncé's representations of relationships between black women. (94)

Thus, despite Beyoncé's problematic participation in queer erasure, her assembling of extra-familial women in what reads as a family unit allows for queer kinship formations. In other words, Formation Beyoncé's creation and promotion of women-centric non-white kinship networks throughout *Lemonade* "resist[s] white supremacist heteropatriarchal family norms and other oppressive structures."²³⁵

Oneka Labennett also looks at kinship formation.²³⁶ Through *Lemonade*, Labennett provides a queer critique of what she calls the genre-defying autoethnographic text. She argues that *Lemonade*'s autoethnographic kinship formation "employs Black women kinfolk to serve as a moral compass, a political point of mobilization, and an 'antidote' to what ails Black families."²³⁷ In Beyoncé's curation of a sisterhood of fictive kin—with the inclusion of the "mothers of the movement," famous athletes (Serena Williams), and young Black faces of Hollywood (Zendaya), she reimagines how Black marriage, sexuality, and kinship are popularly understood (monogamous, heterosexual, and patriarchal), thus creating what Labennett calls *autoethnographic kinship formation*.²³⁸ Further along the queer critique, as noted in Labennett's title of her article, "Beyoncé and Her Husband," Beyoncé and Jay-Z's union is doubly queered in that it is a Black union—white straight unions being normative—that only further contests

²³⁵ Ibid., 95.

²³⁶ Oneka Labennett, "'Beyoncé and Her Husband': Representing Infidelity and Kinship in a Black Marriage." *Differences* (Bloomington, Ind.) 29, no. 2 (2018): 154–188.

²³⁷ Ibid., 169.

²³⁸ Mother of the Movement is a group of women whose African American children have been killed by police officers or by gun violence.

heteronormativity in its positioning of Beyoncé's name first. In other words, the title of the piece queers the gendered stereotyping of Beyoncé's nuclear family structure. Furthermore, she explores how *Lemonade* constructs queer kinship structures and (un)conventional spousal roles. Through this construction, Beyoncé generates a poesis that, rather than locating Black women's liberation in conjugality (as in the order of respectability politics), situates it within her autoethnographic kinship formation. Labennett brings in C. Riley Snorton's "glass closet" in her analysis of the Black family and its impingement of interiority due to damaging stereotypes.²³⁹ Although *Lemonade* has done much work for Black women via these queer resonances, Beyoncé's lack of commitment to visual representations of gender-nonconforming bodies weakens the impact of this work.

Despite the glaring imperfections of this era of *alter egoing*, Formation Beyoncé focuses less on her personal accomplishments and encourages the women around her to band together and create collective change. Even in an anthem concerning capital, Formation Beyoncé and the "Diva" of Sasha Fierce stand in contrast. Whereas Sasha Fierce boasts:

Diva is a female version of a hustla
Of a hustla, of a, of a hustla
Stop the track let me state facts
I told gimme a minute and I'll be right back
Fifty million around the world, and they say that I couldn't get it
I done got so sick and filthy with Benji's, I can't spend it.

Formation Beyoncé counsels:

Okay, ladies, now let's get in formation, I slay
Okay, ladies, now let's get in formation
You know you that bitch when you cause all this conversation
Always stay gracious, best revenge is your paper.

²³⁹ C. Riley Snorton, "Nobody Is Supposed to Know Black Sexuality on the Down Low," (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 2014.

Formation Beyoncé, however, offers a more nuanced understanding of the kind of work Black women do and a distinct attitude towards marketplace logics. Leaving behind familiar refrains about hustling and solely making money to prove the industry wrong, Formation Beyoncé encourages women to organize, become educated, and yes, acquire financial stability for their own mental health: “always stay gracious, best revenge is your paper.” This work is less focused on individual aggrandizement than on the possibilities of the collective.

4.4 Pan-African Motherhood and the Universalizing of American Blackness

Beyoncé’s ever-more frequent references to the maternal (implicit, overt, or projected) is a form of *alter egoing* that I call *Pan-African Mother*, which began to materialize during the Formation Beyoncé era. Beyoncé’s work began to overlap activist iconography with presentations of motherhood. The first glimmers of Beyoncé as Pan-African Mother started with Beyoncé’s public presentation of her first pregnancy at the MTV Video Music Awards in 2011 and her following pregnancy in 2017 when she performed at the VMAs. (see Figure 23 and 24) The height of her Pan-African Mother era culminated in the 2020 visual album, *Black Is King*. (see Figure 25) Rather than pop feminist universality (Sasha Fierce *alter egoing*) or Black American specificity, Pan-African Mother *alter egoing* attempts to universalize Blackness. Beyoncé as Pan-African Mother generates a specifically Black American strategy, for “African American imaginings of Africa often intermingle with—and help illuminate—intimate hopes and desires for Black life in the United States.” Pan-African Mother *alter egoing*, therefore, highlights the possibilities and limits of African American-centered Blackness



Figure 23: Beyoncé performing at the 2011



Figure 24: Beyoncé performing at the Grammys 2017.



Figure 25: Beyoncé performing *Black Is King* (right).

Black Is King was written, directed, and executive produced by Beyoncé. The visual album was an extension of her 2019 record, *The Lion King: The Gift*. The album was dropped July 31, 2020 on *Disney+*, only a month after the project was announced (a deluxe edition of *The Gift* was released alongside the film, which includes the song “Black Parade”). At the 63rd Annual Grammy Awards, *Black Is King* was nominated for Best Music Film, and “Brown Skin Girl” won the award for Best Music Video.

The album starts with the song “Bigger.” The lyrics of the chorus are based on *The Lion King* scene when Mufasa, the father of the protagonist Simba, teaches the lesson that individuals make up the bigger circle of life. Beyoncé enters the scene with the backing of an organ-like synth, walking along a body of water with an infant cradled in her arms in what visually alludes to a baptismal ceremony or even to the story of the infant Moses left amongst the river reeds. The verse is spoken from the point of view of the maternal as she describes her aspirations to be a good mother and wife. Beyoncé sings in a soft conversational, almost lullaby tone, as though she is talking to her infant children as they are falling asleep in her arms. The organ, the ephemeral

vocalizing and women ceremoniously swinging smoking thuribles conjures up a kind of sonic high church, with Beyoncé as officiating priest. Beyoncé’s spoken-word style recreates Beyoncé into a priestly-maternal figure. In this first song of the visual album, Beyoncé is situated as life-giver and lesson-bearer. By drawing on biblical imagery (incense, baptism, basket floating down a river) and lyrics (“life is your birthright,” “bible verse,”) and the tale of *The Lion King*, Beyoncé is crafted as Pan-African Mother, a maternal ancestor.

Black Is King is not the first time Beyoncé has been stylized as maternal. Such scholars as Daphne A. Brooks and Jennifer C. Nash take an explicitly female-gendered maternal look at Beyoncé, one in the context of Beyoncé’s post-Katrina “Upgrade U” release and her public performances of pregnancy. Brooks argues that “Upgrade U” reinforces Beyoncé’s focus on ownership, personal property, and surrogacy. Brooks further argues that Beyoncé’s efforts to maintain spatial control in various circumstances ultimately render her a surrogate for the suffering of Black women due to Hurricane Katrina.²⁴⁰ In “Black Maternal Aesthetics,” Nash analyzes how Beyoncé takes up normative and mainstream modes of performance to reinvigorate and reinvest the political through an aesthetics of “abundance” that she reads in Beyoncé’s performance of pregnancy and Black motherhood.²⁴¹ Ethnomusicologist Atesh Sonneborn notes Beyoncé’s incorporation of African folk lullabies in *Black Is King* that date back to at least the mid-20th century. The use of lullabies further situating her maternal status to the Black diaspora.²⁴² In my analysis of Pan-African Mother *alter egoing*, I expand on this work on Beyoncé and maternity by contrasting her earlier *alter egoing* eras (the early-years Sasha Fierce individual

²⁴⁰ Brooks, Daphne A. “All That You Can’t Leave Behind: Black Female Soul Singing and the Politics of Surrogation in the Age of Catastrophe.” *Meridians* (Middletown, Conn.) 8, no. 1 (2008): 204.

²⁴¹ Jennifer C. Nash, “Black Maternal Aesthetics,” *Theory & Event* 22.3 (2019): 551–575.

²⁴² Sam Adams, “How Black Is King Got Its African Lullabies.” *Slate Magazine*. *Slate*, August 5, 2020. <https://slate.com/culture/2020/08/black-is-king-african-lullaby-samples-smithsonian-folkways.html>.

universality and the specificity of Formation Beyoncé racial membership via BlackLivesMatter iconography), to her most recent alter ego strategy, in which her performance of motherhood crafts her into a maternal figurehead for the broader Black diaspora.

Beyoncé's 2011 and 2017 performance of pregnancy—literally performing while visually pregnant—and her continued performance of maternity in *Black Is King* takes on a phenomenology of a specific type of femaleness that disrupts lines of reasoning that emerge from misogynistic and patriarchal logics.²⁴³ Through the display of her pregnant body, Beyoncé disrupts the binary of subject and object on which patriarchal hierarchies depend. As put by Adrienne Rich:

In early pregnancy, the stirring of the fetus felt like ghostly tremors of my own body, later like the movements of a being imprisoned within me; but both sensations were *my* sensations, contributing to my own sense of physical and psychic space.²⁴⁴

The pregnant body has often been culturally divorced from sexuality and eroticism, (or else fetishized). Furthermore, Black women who “fall” pregnant are demonized in popular culture as irresponsible. In a society that sorts women into sexualized whores and desexualized mothers, Beyoncé's attractive and unruly pregnant body frustrates such binary codings.

Beyoncé as Pan-African Mother bears the conceit that it is through her that all other African-descended people can be birthed into the mainstream of contemporary culture with viable political agency. Like Afrofuturism more broadly, Pan-African Mother troubles temporalities by both looking back to an idealized African home, and forward to an Africanized North America. Through Pan-African Mother, Beyoncé represents a kind of Madonna that nurtures Black folks and protects against the violence of white nationalism.

²⁴³ Kate Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (Oxford: Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2017), xiv. Manne defines misogyny as that which serves to police and enforce patriarchy.

²⁴⁴ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976), 47.

But by what means does Pan-African Mother propose protection from the violence of white nationalism? The first hint is in the name of the visual album. “Black Is King” situates the Black consciousness in African nobility. Pan-African Mother expresses agency with monarchical authority, which implicitly reflects extreme class stratification. Rather than disrupting anti-Blackness through the eradication of racial injustice, *Black Is King* depends on class inequalities, the power of wealth accumulation and the ability to rule over others. In a sense, Pan-African Mother alludes to a kind of paternalism: with Beyoncé in charge, her subjects will be treated well. Understood less generously, the interpretation of Beyoncé in *Black Is King* as African oligarch conjures a “notorious generation of postcolonial African dictators.”²⁴⁵ *Black Is King* is Beyoncé’s attempt to, in her words, “present elements of Black history and African tradition, with a modern twist and a universal message.”²⁴⁶ This goal conflicts with such criticisms as, “Beyoncé doesn’t seem to take contemporary Africa into account in her film and has rooted its imagery in a tribal Africa.”²⁴⁷

My critique of *Black Is King* is an extension of the criticisms leveled against the 2018 music video “Apeshit.”²⁴⁸ In this music video Beyoncé and Jay-Z appear in formal high fashion inside of the Louvre. (see Figure 26 and 27) The entire music video is filmed in the famous museum, simultaneously conjuring opulent high culture and the fact that real-life Beyoncé (and Jay-Z) has the capital (cultural and monetary) to be able to use the famous Louvre as a film set.

²⁴⁵ Russell Rickford, “Beyoncé’s ‘Black Is King’ and the Pitfalls of African Consciousness.” AAIHS, August 18, 2020. <https://www.aaihs.org/beyonces-black-is-king-and-the-pitfalls-of-african-consciousness/>.

²⁴⁶ Eva Sauphie, “Beyoncé’s New Film ‘Black Is King’ Is Stirring Up Controversy.” *The Africa Report.com*. The Africa Report, September 10, 2020. <https://www.theafricareport.com/34850/beyonces-new-film-black-is-king-is-stirring-up-controversy/>.

²⁴⁷ Eva Sauphie, “Beyoncé’s New Film ‘Black Is King’ Is Stirring Up Controversy.” *The Africa Report.com*. The Africa Report, September 10, 2020. <https://www.theafricareport.com/34850/beyonces-new-film-black-is-king-is-stirring-up-controversy/>.

²⁴⁸ The Carters, “Apeshit” in *Everything Is Love*.

Afro-political feminist, Judicaelle Irakoze, tweeted her disappointment that Beyoncé “use[s] her power and status [...] to glorify africanness rooted in power game[s] against the white gaze.”²⁴⁹



Figure 26: Beyoncé (left) and Jay-Z (right) at the Louvre in front of the Mona Lisa.



Figure 27: Beyoncé (left) and Jay-Z (right) at the Louvre in front of the Mona Lisa.

Amongst the limits of her presumably well-intentioned saviorism is Beyoncé’s maintenance of heteronormativity and gender binaries. *Lemonade* in the very least toyed with queer resonances. *Black Is King*, instead of taking steps to further include queer folks, regalized

²⁴⁹ Judicaelle Irakoze, Twitter post, June 28, 2020, 9:38 a.m., https://twitter.com/Judicaelle_/status/1277249954034188288?s=20&t=UNCYf89HQmsH8zwBw6fzUQ.

acceptable forms of gender binaries, a decolonized Black masculinity and liberal (if not liberated) Black femininity. In other words, Pan-African Mother contrasts with Formation Beyoncé by explicitly affirming US-based majoritarian conservative Black gender politics.

It must be noted that in *Black Is King*, Beyoncé prominently displayed artists from Nigeria, South Africa, Ghana, and Cameroon.²⁵⁰ This is an improvement from the visual erasure of queer artists in *Lemonade*, a transgression I noted earlier. What is troubling, though, is the subordinate role these artists play to Beyoncé, a wealthy American. The history of western colonialism and the ongoing imperialism on the African continent can render Beyoncé as yet another superpower accumulating the resources of Africa. This is perhaps the limits of the medium, a mainstream work by a pop star with an avid following (the “Bey Hive”).

A summary of the *Black Is King* on Disney+ gives an insight into Beyoncé’s purpose for the film. It explains that:

“This visual album from Beyoncé reimagines the lessons of *The Lion King* for today’s young kings and queens in search of their own crowns. [...] These timeless lessons are revealed and reflected through Black voices of today, now sitting in their own power. [...] The film is a story for the ages that informs and rebuilds the present. A reunion of cultures and shared generational beliefs. A story of how the people left most broken have an extraordinary gift and a purposeful future.”²⁵¹

4.5 Conclusion

In my estimation, Beyoncé has yet to produce what one may call an unequivocally “radical” Black feminist piece. *Black Is King* highlights the possibilities and limits of African American-

²⁵⁰ Artists who collaborated on *Black Is King* include: Lebohang Morake, Yemi Alade, Shatta Wale, Salatiel, Wizkid, and Busiswa.

²⁵¹ “Black Is King.” Disney+ Originals, July 31, 2020.
<https://disneyplusoriginals.disney.com/movie/black-is-king>

centered Afrofuturism. As put by Russel Rickford, “African American imaginings of Africa often intermingle with—and help illuminate—intimate hopes and desires for Black life in the United States.”²⁵² Thus, the emancipatory potential of Pan-African Mother *alter egoing*, is a particularly Black American strategy, which may not, and probably does not, extend to other diasporic populations outside of the US, and even less so for those on the African continent. This does not, however, disqualify *Black Is King* from being a part of a progressive shift towards the inclusion of non-white voices in US popular culture. Author Tineka Smith’s title of an article she wrote for the *Independent* implies the emancipatory potential of *Black Is King* for the African diaspora in North America: “Beyoncé’s 'Black Is King' is not about cultural appropriation. It's a sober truth about black people’s yearning to belong.”²⁵³

²⁵² Russell Rickford, “Beyoncé's 'Black Is King' and the Pitfalls of African Consciousness.” AAIHS, August 18, 2020. <https://www.aaihs.org/beyonces-black-is-king-and-the-pitfalls-of-african-consciousness/>.

²⁵³ Tineka Smith, “Opinion: Beyonce's 'Black Is King' Is Not about Cultural Appropriation. It's a Sober Truth about Black People's Yearning to Belong.” *The Independent*. Independent Digital News and Media, August 1, 2020. <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/beyonce-black-king-netflix-racism-belonging-slavery-history-a9645986.html>.

5.0 Conclusion

Black women in US American mass popular culture have been historically disqualified or erased from scholarly discourse due to racism, sexism, some would say *misogynoir* logics.²⁵⁴ In the previous chapters of this dissertation, I explored how Black women in popular culture act as critical interpreters of contemporary political culture when performing through their alter egos. Critical race theory, which primarily cites men of color, has made monumental strides in academia and popular culture; Black feminist theory is still frequently confined into a special topic or unit in gender studies programs. In my study of Janelle Monáe, Nicki Minaj, and Beyoncé, I've added to the complex dimensions of Black feminist theory by attaching the practice of *alter egoing* to a long line of Black feminist knowledge producers that have too often taken the back seat to the male dominated critical race scholarship.²⁵⁵ Although my analysis is indebted in part to Frantz Fanon's phenomenological approach to Blackness (1903), I was inspired by the methodological principle of the Black feminist theorist Anna Julia Cooper and Brittney Cooper in that, rather than theorizing the racialized body as solely strife, I approach the "Black female body as a form of possibility."²⁵⁶

²⁵⁴ *Misogynoir* is the co-constitutive, anti-Black, and misogynistic racism, particularly in visual and digital culture, that is directed at Black women. For more on *misogynoir* see: Moya Bailey, "Misogynoir in Medical Media: On Caster Semenya and R. Kelly," *Catalyst* (San Diego, Calif.) 2, no. 2 (September 21, 2016): 1–31 and Moya Bailey, (2010, March 14). They aren't talking about me... *Crunk Feminist Collective*. Retrieved from <http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2010/03/14/they-arent-talking-about-me/>

²⁵⁵ Critical race theory is preoccupied with citing W.E.B Du Bois and Frantz Fanon, thus situating them as the forefathers of the CRT canon. In actuality, there is a long line of women that have been theorizing race and Blackness, most notably Anna Julia Cooper, and more recently Brittney Cooper, Vivian May, Patricia Hill Collins, Sirma Bilge, and Anna Carastathis.

²⁵⁶ Brittney Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 5.

In a couple critical ways musicology is behind other humanities-based fields in regards to embodied knowledge critique. It wasn't until the 1970s that Black music scholarship formally entered American musicological discourse with the work of Eileen Southern (1971). Feminist theory only became solidly situated in American musicological scholarship in the 1990s with the publishing of the work of Susan McClary and Suzanne Cusick.²⁵⁷ Bearing in mind musicology's late acceptance of critical race theory and feminist theory, in tandem with the relegation of Black feminist theory to the periphery of women's studies and its erasure from much of critical race theory, this project is pushing the fields of musicology, critical race theory, and women's studies to consider Black women of popular culture as knowledge producers and primary sources of epistemological inquiry.

Black women in popular music and culture perform intellectual labor when they engage in the 21st-century heuristic and Black feminist strategy of *alter egoing*. Rather than written manifestos or interviews that engage with political discourse and analysis, the visual album and narrative music video format allows these women to create "worlds of transformative politics and possibilities [...] worlds of ideological potentiality that alter the present and map out a future."²⁵⁸ Their intellectual labor of world building takes the form of *critical optimism*, *ecstatic disidentification*, and Black cyberfeminist aesthetics, all of which comment on and critique the circulation of politicized affects in contemporary U.S. electoral politics.

Black feminist theory, by way of Intersectionality theory, has a rich history of heuristics and theories of counter-identification. Intersectionality, with its visual metaphor of intersecting matrices, was defined by the Combahee River Collective as an analytic specifically for

²⁵⁷ McClary (1991) and Suzanne Cusick (1993).

²⁵⁸ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 195.

understanding the interlocking nature of major systems of oppression.²⁵⁹ The cultural white imaginary executes these systems of oppression and, as scholar Shoniqua Roach identifies, determines American iconography that denigrates the social imagery and material body of the Black woman.²⁶⁰ Within such an oppressive American context, intersectionality theory emerged, shaped by multiple scholars who contributed a variety of critical intervention.

Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* (first published in 1990) gave the analytic the *matrix of domination* that, rather than emphasizing identity and subjectivity, articulates varying structures of power.²⁶¹ Essentially, the matrix of domination demonstrates how oppressions are organized, which can position any one subject as both the oppressed and oppressor. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in the *metalanguage of race* theorized other categories of marginalization (gender, class, sexuality) as nonetheless raced categories.²⁶² Frances Beal and Deborah King contributed *double jeopardy* and *multiple jeopardy*, respectively. These theories understand the layering of oppressions (racism, sexism, classism, etc.) as either additive (Beal 1969) or compounded (King 1988).

Intersectionality's rich intellectual history, of which I only pinpointed a few nodes, is most often associated with Crenshaw's 1989 and 1991 articles in which she offered the titular metaphor.²⁶³ Since coining the term *intersectionality*, Crenshaw has been crowned in women's

²⁵⁹ "A Black Feminist Statement (The Combahee River Collective, 1977)." *Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History*, 2006.

²⁶⁰ Shoniqua Roach, "Black Respectable Currency: Reading Black Feminism and Sexuality in Contemporary Performance." *Journal of American culture* (Malden, Mass.) 42, no. 1 (March 2019): 10–20.

²⁶¹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought : Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* 2nd edition (London ;: Routledge, 2014).

²⁶² Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race." *Signs* 17, no. 2 (December 1992): 251–274.

²⁶³ "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Poli- tics" (1989) and "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color" (1991). *Intersectionality* responds to U.S. American laws that disregard Black women, by insisting that the law both recognize and redress the experiences of Black women, as both Black and women.

studies as the creator of Black feminism. Vivian May and Britney Cooper, however, push the emergence of a Black feminist analytic and praxis back to Anna Julia Cooper's work on *race women*, and her book *A Voice from the South* (1892) wherein the interdependence of race, gender, class, and region is explored.²⁶⁴

My own study has led me to Janelle Monáe, Nicki Minaj, and Beyoncé and their alter ego strategies. There are many more artists who have alter egos, stage personas and alternate personalities: Erykah Badu, Lil' Kim, Lil Nas X, Prince, Shakira, Madonna, Eminem, Garth Brooks, Elton John. In my own work I focused specifically on contemporary Black women artists and on *alter egoing* as a way of interpreting the critical work an alter ego enables these women to perform. This critical work takes on various forms. It can be a performance strategy, an avenue for disconnecting the performing subject from the transgressive, political orientation of their work. It is a useful technique for Black women who need to maintain ties to normativity and respectability, such as Beyoncé's use of Sasha Fierce and Monáe's early *alter egoing* through Cindi Mayweather.

Alter egoing is a heuristic that makes Monáe's, Minaj's, and Beyoncé's refashioning of artistic imaginaries legible as intellectual labor in response to contemporary political events. Stated in various ways throughout this dissertation, Black women have created many strategies of disidentification that resituate the Black agent in contemporary political culture, a culture that has historically used the Black body, in the words of scholar Stuart Hall, "as if it was, and it often was, the only cultural capital we had."²⁶⁵ The affective fluidity of *alter egoing*—from the optimism of

264 Although not within the scope of this dissertation, there are important discussions of early Chicana and Indigenous formulations of intersectionality. For more on Chicana intersectionality, see Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa. *This Bridge Called My Back : Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Fourth edition. Albany, NY: State University of New York SUNY Press, 2015.

265 Stuart Hall, "What is this "Black" in Black Popular Culture?" *Black Popular Culture*. Ed. Michelle Wallace. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), 109.

Monáe, to the ecstasy of Minaj, to the glamorous aggression of Beyoncé –allows mass-mediated artists to critique American notions of race, gender, and sexuality through the distinctive means of artistic creation. *Alter Egoing* as a strategy maps an ongoing fashioning of the corporal and vocal body that allows Black women to critique contemporary political culture, but still circulate inside of it. *Alter egoing* is an act of *ecstatic disidentification*, the Black cyberfeminist expression of an artist's *critical optimism* that takes pleasure in her oppositional performance.

Appendix A : Discography

Beyonce. I am... Sasha Fierce. Music World/Columbia, 2008.

Beyonce. Lemonade. Parkwood/Columbia, 2016.

Janelle Monáe. Big Boi, Saul Williams, Wondaland ArchOrchestra of Montreal, and Deep Cotton. The ArchAndroid: Suite II and III. Bad Boy Records/Wondaland, 2010;

Janelle Monáe. "Dirty Computer " Place of publication not identified: Bad Boy Records, 2018;

Janelle Monáe. Metropolis: The Chase Suite I. Bad Boy Records, 2007;

Janelle Monáe. Prince, Erykah Badu, Solange, Miguel, and Esperanza Spalding. The Electric Lady. Bad Boy Records/Wondaland, 2013

Nicki Minaj. Pink Friday. Young Money, Cash Money/Republic, 2010.

Nicki Minaj. Pink Friday: Roman Reloaded. Young Money, Cash Money/Republic, 2012.

Nicki Minaj. The Pinkprint. Young Money, Cash Money/Republic, 2014.

Nicki Minaj. Queen. Young Money, Cash Money/Republic, 2018.

Appendix B : YouTube Videos

“bell hooks: Beyoncé Is A Terrorist,” FORAtv, August 18, 2014, YouTube video, 0:59, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FS6LNpeJPbw>

Beyoncé, “Beyoncé - Diva (Trailer),” Beyoncé, November 10, 2010, YouTube video, 3:08, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4BNanYc-tHc>

“Beyoncé on Her Alter Ego, Sasha Fierce | The Oprah Winfrey Show | Oprah Winfrey Network,” YouTube video, 1:36, posted by OWN, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4AA5G8vCI9w>.

Monáe, Janelle. “Janelle Monáe Explains Dirty Computer Visuals, What Pansexuality Means to Her, and More!” May 3, 2018, YouTube video, 24:43, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TGhNbcIRKfI>

“Nicki Minaj Explains Who Roman Is,” YouTube video, 2:23, posted by Christmatic International, [://www.youtube.com/watch?v=km5R3KixDzo&t=22s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=km5R3KixDzo&t=22s).

“Nicki Minaj: My Time Again,” 18:13, YouTube, posted by Nicki Minaj Lyrics, February 11, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9EhCm9-Sp0>

“Nicki Minaj Recording Roman’s Revenge,” Onikamonster, 3:31, YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I81a3SahOmc>

“Nicki Minaj’s Rise to Fame (Ep. 1)” 15:27, YouTube, posted by Nicki Minaj Lyrics, July 13, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=btjP2CgXQpA&t=17s>.

“Nicki Minaj vs Rosenberg Face to Face!,” YouTube video, 27:58, posted by “HOT 97,” May 28, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7KC4kL5CE8>

“Rap cover songs don’t exist (and here’s why),” YouTube video, 16:40, posted by “Adam Neely,” September 22, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D_mh1Rq35ZM.

“Talking with Janelle Monáe on sci-fi, androids and Slack (full interview),” YouTube video, 8:30, posted by CNET Highlights, Jan 15, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WLHAa-1D2WU>.

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